

Toshio Satou

Illustration by Nao Watanuki

10

Suppose

a Kid from the

LAST DUNGEON
BOONIES Moved
to a Starter Town



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Nao Watanuki



Suppose
a Kid from the LAST DUNGEON
BOONIES moved ★ Starter Town



"I'd like to try all the positions!"

It's time for internships already?!
The heated race to scout Lloyd begins!

Open now!

The Azami Bathhouse is complete!

Come relax at the castle!



"I
won't!"

Get
stuck
here!"

Heroism is all about attitude!
And with everyone's memories
riding on this blow—



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SUPPOSE A KID FROM THE LAST DUNGEON BOONIES MOVED TO A STARTER TOWN 10

TOSHIO SATOU

Translation by Andrew Cunningham

Cover art by Nao Watanuki

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TATOEBA LAST DUNGEON MAENO MURANO SHOUNEN GA JYOBAN NO
MACHI DE KURASUYOUNA MONOGATARI volume 10

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Character Profiles



Lloyd Belladonna

Boy raised in the town of legend. Worried about his career path.



Marie the Witch

Mystery shopkeeper. Actually the princess of Azami.



Alka

Immortal chief of the town of legend. Dotes on Lloyd.



Selen Hemein

Lloyd saved her from a curse. Madly in love with the man of her destiny.



Riho Flavin

Former skilled mercenary. Hoping Lloyd will lead her to fortune.



Phyllo Quinone

A martial artist who insists Lloyd is her master. Also in love with him.



Micono Zol

Upperclassman at Lloyd's school. In love with Marie.



Allan Lidocaine

Noble's son and follower of Lloyd. Now married to Renge.



Merthophan Dextro

Former Azami Army Colonel. Currently an agricultural evangelist.



Satan

The demon lord of the night. Trained Lloyd's combat skills.



Luke Thistle Azami

King of Azami. Very curious about the one Marie loves.



Rol Calcife

Head of Azami's intelligence bureau. Has known Riho since they were little.



Sardin Valyl-Tyrosine

King of Rokujou. Also Mena and Phyllo's father.



Renge Audoc

Chief of the Ascorbic Domain's Audoc Clan. Married to Allan.



Tramadol

Super-suspicious local lord. Has it in for the Lidocaines.



Shouma

Young man from Kunlun. Has great hopes for Lloyd's future.



Sou

A man made from runes. Fated to never die, grows despondent.

Prologue

A boy was leaning against the window frame, staring at the view outside.

He was maybe fourteen or fifteen. Healthy, tan, well-defined features.

But the look on his face was so cold, it ruined his good looks. He wasn't watching the people passing but thinking of some far-off place. Perhaps he was homesick; perhaps something else... The air about him was difficult to put into words.

The room behind him was ornate, far too large and well-furnished for a boy living alone.

There was nothing but lavishly decorated furniture. No signs of life. The decor was neither minimalistic nor indifferent but instead suggested the kind of housecleaning that preceded a suicide.

This grim silence was broken by a visitor.

"Shouma! That spell was something else!"

Clad in a mage's robe and sorcerer's accessories, the speaker was rubbing his hands together.

The boy neither turned nor answered.

"Genuinely astonishing. A monster, gone in the blink of an eye! The world must know about this! Our names together on the dissertation!"

"Sigh..."

Shouma turned at last, looking unenthusiastic, a fact entirely lost upon the mage.

"With my connections, we can publish without all that red tape. Just skip straight to the profits! You'll have a fortune to last a lifetime. And that's hardly

a bad thing, is it?”

This provoked no reaction—except the mention of money, which earned a sniff of disgust.

Before the mage could demand an answer, another man swept in.

“Shouma! Monsters sighted! The warrior guild requests your aid!”

The guild rep, wearing extravagant armor, pushed the mage out of his way.

“I’m not in your guild,” Shouma said, glaring at him.

“Don’t be that way! Every man wants to be a warrior! All of us dream of protecting citizens from monsters and being showered in accolades!”

Shouma’s face contorted with further disgust. “Then go make your dream come true,” the boy snapped.

“No, I...I’m a married man, so...”

The soldier’s excuses were so feeble, Shouma didn’t even have the energy to sigh.

Then, a third visitor stepped in. “Away with you gentlemen. Shouma is busy and must not be disturbed.”

““Third Queen Consort...””

The sudden entrance of royalty was enough to send them both packing.

When she was sure they were gone, the queen turned toward Shouma.

“Sir Shouma, I have banished those interlopers. I await your compliments.”

“Thanks.”

A begrudging response, to say the least. But despite the utter lack of warmth, the queen consort appeared to be beside herself with joy.

“Powerful mages and guild warriors crave his attention, but he is in *my* hands. The greatest weapon a woman could have. A gift from the gods that will unshackle me from the constraints of being a third wife. All those who scorned me will weep!”

“.....”

Apparently, he was a “gift,” not a person.

The look on his face was growing genuinely angry—

“———!”

Shouma’s eyes snapped open.

Roads soaked in warm sunlight. He’d drifted off at the reins.

“I *have* been tired, lately. So much to do...”

The horse drawing his carriage shot him a concerned look.

From his pocket, he pulled out a photo of himself with his arm around a gentle-looking, chestnut-haired boy. In the photo, Shouma was smiling—a smile so warm, it was hard to believe he was the same boy from that dream.

“I won’t let you suffer the same fate I did, Lloyd.”

Chapter 1

A Career Path: Suppose a Kid from the Last Dungeon Boonies Was Worried About His Future

After school at the Azami Military Academy...

Once again, the day's training had worn the cadets to the bone, and the lectures that followed had taken an equal toll on their minds.

With both over, relief filled the classroom—but one boy was still at his desk, making noises as he thought out loud.

“What should I dooo?”

This was Lloyd Belladonna, an adorable boy with soft, chestnut-colored hair.

Born in a remote village named Kunlun, he admired a soldier from a novel and had traveled all the way to the royal capital to become like him.

Now he was staring at a document on his desk. It wasn't leftover homework or makeup exams, either.

Wondering what it could be, his classmates, Riho and Phyllo, came over.

“Wazzup, Lloyd? School's over, let's go.”

“.....Did something happen?”

Clearly, Lloyd had completely missed classes ending. Looking sheepish, he scratched his cheek.

“It's that time, huh? I didn't notice.”

“You had one heck of a frown going on. Someone ask you an impossible favor?”

“.....We're happy to help.”

“It's nothing *that* serious,” Lloyd said, trying to alleviate their concerns. “And

certainly nothing impossible. Just...things like this are worth thinking about, you know?”

He showed them the paper—a survey about his future career goals.

“Oh, we all got one of those.”

“Yeah, and the Azami army has a lot of potential placements.”

Your position was decided upon graduation from the academy.

Guard duty, intelligence, border patrol, and so on. These positions had a variety of salaries and benefits. The school might be training future officers, but if your grades weren't good enough, you might well find yourself on the front lines, fighting monsters every day.

Riho smirked, giving Lloyd a shoulder rub to loosen him up.

“It's not that big a deal, though. Just write whatever.”

“No, I could never—I'm the head of the first-years!”

“But that's the thing. It's way too early to be thinking about this stuff.”

“.....Or do you have a goal in mind?”

“Not really,” he admitted, embarrassed. “I just wanted to be like the soldier in this novel, so...”

“Oh, right,” Riho said. He'd mentioned this before.

“.....A novel?” Phyllo asked, head tilting.

“Lloyd's favorite,” Riho explained. “He enlisted to be like the hero in it.”

“.....Oh?”

“But yeah, the guy in the book was running all across the map, fighting monsters with ancient weapons, like he was on some epic quest. Doesn't really line up with any real-world positions. He was more an adventurer than a soldier.”

“Basically.” Lloyd chuckled. “So before I decide, I need to think about what I *can* do. And all I can think of is cooking and cleaning.”

“.....But you're so strong, Master. You beat that golem!”

“Nah, I just shattered a moving statue. Chief Alka could take care of that with her little finger.”



Alka was the chief of Kunlun. If this were a video game, Kunlun would be the village just outside the final dungeon. Everyone who lived there treated the most vicious monsters like ordinary animals, and their leader...well, she was prone to teleporting and dropping meteors by the bushel.

So comparisons to that freak of nature just made the girls wince.

“She should *not* be your standard...”

“.....The road to self-awareness is *long*.”

“What did you write?” Lloyd asked.

“Oh, I’m basically good with anything that pays well, so I wrote a list of all the high-salary positions.”

“Huh...?”

“Wishing is free.” Riho shrugged. “You, Phyllo?”

Phyllo pulled her survey from her bag, silently handing it over.

Not the neatest handwriting, but it was all security, guard duty—anything that might require fisticuffs.

“Ha, you thought this through.”

“.....Mena and I were mercenaries. I know the job.”

“And you know yourself,” Lloyd said. “That’s a good thing.”

This compliment made Phyllo turn bright red.

Prompting Riho to tease someone.

“Aww, that was so cute! Selen would be all like, ‘I know myself, which means I can take care of the chores, which means we’re already married!’ Wait... Where *is* Selen?”

Lloyd blinked, scanning the room.

“Did she leave already? Oh, there she is.”

He pointed...to Selen hunched over her own career survey, looking just as lost as Lloyd.

The three of them moved to her desk.

“.....What’s wrong?”

“Ummm... Oh, Sir Lloyd! Riho, Phyllo... I’m ashamed of myself.”

“Heh-heh-heh, this is a shocker. I didn’t think you’d get stuck on a survey like this.” Riho smirked.

Selen just shook her head. “I’m not.”

“Oh? You sure looked stuck.”

Selen pulled out a thesaurus, looking deeply upset.

“I turned the form in once, but they said I couldn’t write ‘blushing bride’ on it. I’ve got to resubmit, but I’ve tried everything! ‘Wonderful wife!’ ‘Perfect partner!’ ‘Conniving consort!’ ‘Nascent newlywed!’ ‘Salacious spouse!’ All rejected! I’m hitting this thesaurus as hard as I can, but I really don’t see what the problem is.”

“The fundamental one, clearly. We’re soldiers, not kindergartners.”

Riho was even harsher than usual, but Phyllo took the patient approach.

“.....Let’s look at the repeated rejections as a sign. I got two myself.”

“You’re birds of a feather, Phyllo.”

“.....But I’m the smarter bird.”

Lloyd once again proved capable of rolling with all of Selen’s antics. “Ah-ha-ha. But it is important to consider every possibility.”

Those kind words were all it took to send her to heaven.

“To consider every possibility means I can take care of the chores, which means we’re already married!”

“Could you be *less* predictable?”

Selen was not one to defy expectations, and this earned her two half-lidded glares.

While that was happening, a big man strode in—Allan.

“All girls dream of being brides one day!” he said. “Right, merc?”

“Why am I the one you ask?!”

Allan spent most of his time getting teased and had spied his chance for payback.

But Lloyd saw this as an opportunity to talk about their career paths. He was interested in Allan’s.

“Allan, what did you put on your survey? Maybe us guys should stick together.”

“Ha-ha-ha, read it and weep!”

Allan slammed his sheet down with utter confidence. Nobody could have predicted the contents.

“.....Border patrol...international diplomacy...customs...”

“So all jobs based outside of Azami?”

“Exactly!” Allan beamed with pride. “Every man’s dream! Leaving one’s native lands to broaden one’s horizons! I’d go so far as to call it *necessary*.”

Riho had an idea where this was coming from and started interrogating him.

“Oh-ho? But the Lidocaines are local lords from near the Rokujou border. Is Azami even technically your ‘native land’?”

“Urp... Okay, no, it’s my second home. But leaving it behind to—”

“.....What’s this about, really?”

Allan caught the threat in Phyllo’s look, gulped, and confessed.

“Renge’s getting more and more possessive... Since I’m still a student, we haven’t filed a marriage license officially. When I graduate, I’m so scared we’re gonna end up hitched. I can’t even sleep at night...and the only way out I could see was this. My ‘flee the country’ plan.”

To explain, a series of misunderstandings here in Azami had led to Allan earning himself the moniker *Dragon Slayer*. It was frequently hard to tell if he was blessed or cursed.

As a result of those accolades, the head of the Ascorbic Domain’s Audoc clan, Renge Audoc, fell in love with him. With exactly zero time spent dating, less

than a week after they'd first met, she'd walked the aisle with him. For all Allan's wailing about wanting a girlfriend, a surprise wedding to a foreign political leader...was a bit much for his fraying nerves. He'd managed to beg for an extension until graduation, so...you can assume he's a hot mess in general.

"" ""

Undaunted by the girls' death stares, Allan cleared his throat, grumbling his way through his list of complaints.

"I mean, I'm only too aware I don't deserve a wife that beautiful. I'm no match for her! But when I admitted as much, she just started me on a hellish training regimen. I'm going right from training at school to more training. I'm not allowed to eat anything but some goop that's good for your skin, mandatory lotions every night—she checks to make sure the amount's going down! She insists I have to be elegant, but what does that even mean?! And as if controlling my life wasn't bad enough, if I'm seen talking to a girl she doesn't know, she demands a written report!"

A conversation about their future hopes had taken quite a hopeless turn.

Naturally, Selen thought otherwise. "That all sounds ideal to me! Reports on contact with strange girls are simply a standard obligation."

Allan had clearly picked the wrong person to complain to. If he had to gripe about being on a tight leash, he'd have found a more receptive audience in the neighborhood dog.

"Er, wha... How is this *my* fault?"

"You've got a hot wife with a political career. What's your beef?"

".....All that fuss about how you'd never get married and were doomed to be single your whole life? Now you've somehow pulled it off, and you whine nonstop. Pathetic."

"B-but I mean... Surtr, help me out here!"

Reeling from the girls' blows, Allan turned to the demon lord possessing his ax.

"That's right, ladies," the ax said, glowing softly. "I was hanging from his hip

while they were going at it, and she's so clingy. I wouldn't last three days."

"Oh, hi there, Surtr!" Lloyd said. "Are Allan and Renge really having that hard a time?"

"They are, Lloyd! It's hell times two! Here I am, unsealed at last, and she's so controlling, I'm thinking maybe I'd be better off getting sealed again! I tried to cheer him up by luring him into an adult store, and she caught us in the act! I thought I'd never hear the end of it."

Everyone wore the same expression. This was *clearly* the demon lord's fault.

The first to address that head-on was Vritra, the snake possessing Selen's belt.

"Honestly, you haven't grown a whit. Allan may look old, but he is still a student. You shouldn't be taking him anywhere so depraved. Do not allow your own fixations to drive you."

"You're such a hard-ass, direct—I mean, Vritra."

Let's give some context. Selen's belt was possessed by the former guardian beast of Kunlun, previously a large snake. But in the distant past, when he was still human, Vritra had been Director Ishikura, a scientist studying rune technology. And before his time as a demon lord in turtle form, Surtr had been a researcher named Tony. A failed experiment had turned him into what he was today.

"You must know how I feel, Vritra!" Surtr said, arguing with his former boss. "The sadness gets me down! I haven't talked to any sexy ladies in centuries! In this form, I'll definitely do way better than in that old tubby body of mine."

Arguably, he was putting a positive spin on this tragedy.

"Fool, you should count yourself lucky to have a sensible master. I find myself forced to aid Mistress Selen's constant borderline-criminal stalker activities, and the guilt is killing me. The evenings spent listening to her constant rants about the wonders of Lloyd give me not a moment to— *Hurk!*"

When Vritra started grumbling, Selen scowled and yanked the buckle her way.

"What was that, Vritra? Must I tie you to a nearby pillar and run through the full list of Lloyd's one hundred and eight sublime qualities?"

“N-n-no, anything but that, Mistress! Please don’t! At least not into a bow tie!”

“Yeah, you got it worse. RIP, Director.”

Surtr had it pretty good, really. Seeing someone worse off was definitely comforting. Perhaps it was the worst route to optimism, though.

“Anyway! If I put some distance between us, Renge’s head will cool off, and she’ll loosen up! So I’m doing it! My mind’s made up!”

Allan’s fist quivered.

“Um, Allan,” Lloyd said. “I think the more distance and time this takes, the more it’ll wind her up...”

“Lloyd, I appreciate your concern. But don’t worry! I am Allan Toin Lidocaine! No matter the trials in my path, my decision stands!”

“Ah-ha-ha, I’m well aware how you come through in a pinch, Allan. But that’s not what I meant. I can’t see this ending well, but...I hope it does!”

Allan was in the corner roaring, “I’m gonna be the king of bachelors!” Lloyd gave him a look of deep pity.

He might be a walking disaster, but Allan *did* have a fiery side to him. Courage in a crisis, and the ability to see his convictions through. In tournament bouts, he’d fought superior opponents, getting back up again and again until victory was his...and frankly, Renge’s approach was putting him in that same mind-set.

“He doesn’t listen to people any more than Selen does.”

“.....Mmm.”

“You take that back! I am nothing like this uncouth boor!”

At this point, the door slid open with a thunderous rattle, and who should appear but Renge Audoc herself.

Glossy black hair with a red ribbon accent. Today, she wore not her usual red dress but an Azami military uniform.

After their wedding (such as it was), she’d briefly allowed a long-distance relationship before securing herself a position as a special instructor to the

security division.

She strode across the room like she owned the place, her eyes locked on Allan.

“Oh, Renge!” Lloyd said, trying to ease the tension. “It’s been a while!”

Renge uncrossed her arms to give him a quick, graceful bow.

“Hello, Lloyd. And all my husband’s school friends. I trust you’re all elegantly sipping tea?”

Chief of the Ascorbic Domain’s Audoc clan, Renge had devoted considerable time to overturning rough-hewn associations with the weapon. She was a firm believer in “everlasting elegance.” However...

“Allan. I believe you have something to say to me.”

“I do?”

“Cat got yer tongue, boy?!”

...she had a tendency to slip into her natural accent when she got worked up. The Domain was a holy land for martial arts training, and she was just as big a meathead as the rest of them.

Staring daggers at Allan, she swung her ax, striking the desk in front of him.

The shock knocked him over backward.

“Wait, what? Renge? I used the lotion and everything! Even drank three cups of your tea!”

She thrust his career survey in front of him.

You could see the blood draining from his face.

“I caught wind of this survey thing and got Choline to gimme a look. And what do I get? All positions that’ll place you by yourself, miles away! The top three places no newlyweds would wanna go! Explain this! With your body!”

“W-with my body?! Augh, helllp! Noooooo!”

Her tree-felling arm grabbed the nape of his neck, and his shriek rose to girlish levels as she dragged him away.

“I—I hope he’ll be okay... Did she mean ‘body language’?”

“.....Best not to question it.”

Would Allan be seen at school again? Before anyone could voice a theory, Chrome and Choline came in.

“Was that Renge dragging Allan away? Again?”

“Couple trouble isn’t our business. Forget about ‘em.”

They both clasped hands in Allan’s memory and started waving for the rest of the students to vacate the classroom.

“School’s over, cadets. Get a move on. There’s more training tomorrow.”

“Yep, yep. Get that good rest, all part of the job. Oh, and Lloyd...”

“Oh, I’m heading out now!”

He hastily grabbed his things, ready to leave.

But they were both grinning at him.

“Oh, no need to rush. Have you finished your survey yet?”

“Indeed! If you have, lemme know in advance, okay?”

Lloyd shook his head ruefully.

“S-sorry...I’m still thinking.”

They both waved off his apology.

“Don’t apologize, Lloyd.”

“You get on home and take your time thinking about it.”

Their teachers were clearly acting suspicious, and Riho shot them a look.

“Hmm... Colonel Chrome, Colonel Choline...”

“Yes, Riho? You have a question?”

“Yeah,” she said, looking from one to the other. “Is there a reason you’re doing this survey so much earlier than any other year?”

“I thought the same!” Selen said, jumping in. “Micona said they weren’t asked until the start of their second year!”

Phyllo nodded. “.....Honestly, we still don’t know much about the different careers and positions, so it’s not much use asking us now.”

This barrage made Chrome’s and Choline’s smiles look strained.

Riho wasn’t one to miss that.

“So...what is it you’re hiding?”

“N-nothing, Riho!” Choline said, a hint of desperation in her voice. “It’s never too early to plan for the future!”

“Exactly.” Chrome nodded. “Many of you had never thought about it before! This is the perfect chance to start that process.”

Riho’s eyes narrowed.

Chrome stood his ground, fervently talking.

This was enough to convince Selen.

“I had my doubts, but it does make sense. If we’re both expecting to work, we should attempt to get a position together. That’s the key to successful dual-income marriages.”

Not actually a factor.

Choline would ordinarily scoff at that, but...

“G-good point, Selen! Anyone planning on getting married after graduation needs to plan for it!”

...today she actually *agreed* with her.

She *must* be hiding something. Riho’s and Phyllo’s suspicions rose.

Reaching his limit, Chrome tried to end the discussion.

“W-well, Lloyd, think about it! Okay?”

“Uh, yeah.”

“If you have any questions, feel free to ask! Bye!” And they were gone like the wind.

Riho watched them go, tapping her fingers.

“Something’s clearly up. Right, Phyllo?”

“.....Mmm.”

Meanwhile, Lloyd was frowning at his survey form again.

“My future... I bet Shouma would have filled this out instantly.”

He carefully filed it in his bag and left the school, lost in thought.

Why did Chrome and Choline look guilty and run away?

Furthermore, why were they holding the surveys so weirdly early?

It all went back to something the king had said a few days ago.

At the palace in Azami’s Central District...

The king had summoned Chrome, Choline, and Phyllo’s sister, Mena.

On the throne, King Luke Thistle Azami was looking grave. Chrome clenched his jaw tightly, bracing himself for the worst.

The king sighed. As if speaking to himself, he murmured, “I had no idea Maria had feelings for Lloyd. A cadet working in the cafeteria. I just assumed she was after Allan!”

He’d heard Princess Maria—aka Marie—was in love with the man who’d saved the kingdom from the demon lord, Abaddon. To his chagrin, he’d simply assumed that man must be the one featured in the army’s PR campaign—Allan.

The fact that he’d been deceived by his own people’s propaganda had come as quite a shock.

“Your Majesty, it stands to reason,” Chrome said. “Lloyd looks like a gentle boy. Unless you’ve been through the blender and back, you’d never realize how strong he really is.”

“Yep,” Choline chimed in. “No reason you would.”

Desperate placations. But Mena just smirked.

“But leaping to Allan-sized conclusions is a bit more than a ‘slipup.’ He and Lloyd are leagues apart! You gotta double-check these things, man.”

“Don’t, Mena!” Choline wailed. “Think of everything he has done, only to

learn it was for the wrong man and that all his efforts had been in vain! A blunder like that really takes its toll on a king!”

This was all true and totally twisting the knife. The king let out a strained groan.

“I think you finished him off,” Chrome said, hand on his forehead.

“It’s fine,” the king said. A magnanimous gesture. Just ignore his pallor. “I leaped in without thinking. Maria had let things slip before. Phrases like, ‘gentle boy’ or ‘so adorable you just want to squeeze him,’ and I did wonder, ‘Adorable? That manimal?’ or ‘Maybe it’s *not* Allan at all?’ But I didn’t want to be some bad dad shaming my daughter’s tastes, so I let it go unquestioned and made a right hash of things.”

“““””””

All three of them were thinking the same thing. *If it felt that odd to you, find a way to pry!* But all dads live in fear of their teenage daughter’s ire, so we cannot blame the king here.

The king felt recriminations rising within, but stroked his beard to calm himself, then got to the point.

“That’s why I called you here today. It was this Lloyd who saved us all. Right, Chrome?”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“And he’s the one Maria loves.”

“Correct.”

At this point, the king connected a few dots.

“Uh, wait. I’ve heard he’s staying at Maria’s house? I wasn’t worried because they’re both students of the same master, an entirely platonic-sounding relationship. We’re sure nothing’s happened? No lines crossed? I don’t need to call in the troops?”

That was an alarming statement, but Mena didn’t even widen her infamously narrow eyes.

“Never fear, Your Majesty. She’s not even at the playing field yet, let alone first base. We got firm intel from people in the know. My report says, ‘She’s such a disaster, she’s spent months living with him and never does anything but look. I’d have sealed the deal in mere hours!’”

The snitch here was obvious and spot-on. Everyone nodded.

Except the king, who was somewhat appalled to hear his daughter described as a “disaster.” But as long as nobody was getting anywhere, he could let that pass.

“Uh, well, good. Without the resolve and responsibility required to marry a princess, things *must* remain platonic. Still—Mena, did I detect a note of jealousy?”

“Absolutely not. No more than five tablespoons, Your Majesty.”

That was kind of a lot.

“I see. It’s just...this Lloyd boy hasn’t done anything *obvious*.”

“Right, nearly all his actions have been outta the public eye. Even the Military Festival thing wound up officially categorized as ‘part of the show,’ since Rol was trying to avoid panic.”

“Hmm,” the king mused.

“Your Majesty,” Chrome said nervously. “What’s on your mind? Are you trying to push them—?”

“I believe their relationship is their business, and I have no say in it. I’m not going to abuse my power as king and push them into anything.”

Choline looked visibly relieved.

“Whew,” she said. “If you were to say, ‘Nobody goes home till they’re together!’ that’d be worse than any war.”

Mena was nodding vigorously.

“That said,” the king continued. “If Maria and Lloyd *do* become a couple, he’ll need the appropriate status.”

“Huh...,” Chrome said.

Only the king seemed at all sold on *that* concept.

“He will!” the king insisted. “It’s vital! If Lloyd graduates and becomes an ordinary soldier, living an ordinary life...Maria will never return to the palace!”

You could hear the pieces falling into place.

“See? Preparing a suitable position for Lloyd is the bait I need to lure Maria back to the royal family!”

“So really...you just want the princess home.”

“I can see that.”

“Just don’t overdo it, Your Majesty.”

The king squirmed under their stares and cleared his throat.

“While we can never admit it publicly, the boy has saved Azami and deserves a suitable reward. One other than Maria herself.”

Everyone was on board with *that*.

“An excellent idea, sir.”

“Yep, give credit where credit’s due.”

“Might even help him realize how good he is, Choline.”

Seeing everyone on board, the king excitedly continued.

“So I’m issuing orders in secret to all of you! Investigate and discover Lloyd Belladonna’s goals for the future!”

Mena grinned, seeing where this was headed. “Aha! Find out what position would be the best reward, then?”

“Indeed. His placement will pave his path to achieving the necessary social status. We’ll make sure he gains the skills necessary for it. Which demands an appropriate training period.”

Choline was nodding. “That won’t be a problem at all, Your Majesty. Right, Chrome?”

“Hmm, we can simply pass out career path surveys early and find out what he wants to do.”

They grinned at each other, relieved the orders weren't anything difficult, for once.

"Then I'll entrust you with this matter. Mena, once we've learned Lloyd's goals, you'll be in charge of laying the groundwork for them."

In other words, this whole survey thing was just an excuse for the king to get his daughter home.

The instructors had assumed it would be a simple matter...but as you are all aware, nothing Lloyd-related ever is.

"Leave it to us!"

"This'll be a cinch."

"Aye-aye, sir!"

But oblivious to all of that, the three officers saluted and left the audience chamber.

Back in the present, at Marie's shop on the East Side...

Lloyd had finished with the housework, but that didn't mean he was resting—he didn't even take his apron off before setting the career survey down on the table, his frown deepening. Time for round two!

Watching him go at it was Marie the Witch—Maria Azami.

Born princess of Azami, she had begun disguising herself as a witch, working behind the scenes to wrest control of the land back from a demon lord.

While Lloyd himself never realized it, he had single-handedly thwarted that plot. She could have gone back to her old life—but she enjoyed her current freedom and had her beloved Lloyd around to handle all the housework, so she'd made up a series of excuses to maintain this wonderful shopkeeper lifestyle.

The lazy witch facade had been a cover story—but she decided to keep it, changing her class status. Once you experience the easy life, it's hard to reacclimate to how things once were.

Marie had a mortar and pestle and was making medicine, keeping one eye on

Lloyd as he mused.

Hmm, he's clearly fretting about something. Maybe I should ask? Earn myself some points?

These points did not actually exist, and the mind boggles at what earning them could possibly achieve.

Marie was just as big a disaster as Mena's informant (Selen) had said she was, but here she managed to convince herself to speak.

"What's wrong, Lloyd? Stuck on something?"

"Hmm... Oh, sorry. I've got to fill out this career path survey, but I just don't know what to put."

He told her everything, up to and including the discussion about the novel he'd read.

"Your whole career, huh? Hmm. That's a bit early, right? Did they move it up?"

Marie was unaware this was all her father's scheme.

Doesn't matter. Just gotta earn these Lloyd points!

Marie abandoned questioning the situation and instead began searching for words that would rack up these fictitious points. Probably not the best use of her time.

Hmm. "You can do anything..." No, that won't work. "Take me to the castle..." But I don't wanna go.

She ran through different romantic simulations in her head, wondering how best to raise affection levels and clear the Lloyd route. She was thinking like a teenage boy.

Or I could try relieving the tension by throwing my arms around him and playing it off as a joke... "Just kidding! Aw, did you think I meant it? Relaxed now?" What a flawless plan!

Actually, even a teenage boy wouldn't be that obnoxious.

Moments away from this delusional time bomb going off...

Rattle...rattle rattle...ratttttttttle...

The closet started shaking...thrashing.

This was hardly unprecedented—it was a precursor to teleportation.

Marie knew—kid grandma was coming.

The closet door flew open.

Marie found herself already on her hands and knees, via a smooth, polished motion, with all the athletic beauty of a karate exhibition.

Apologies were pouring out of her before she even hit the floor.

“Eeeek! Sorry, Master! I was merely visualizing the embrace! I had no intention of actually going through with it! Mercy, please—mercy!”

It was almost admirable how easily she had cast aside her dignity.

But it was not Alka visiting this time.

“Mmm? Why are you on your knees, Marie?”

“Maria...did you drop something?”

“.....Urp?! Satan?! Merthophan?!”

Dressed in aristocratic finery, with unruly hair that looked like horns, was Satan—the demon lord of the night and the man who’d taken over Kunlun guardian duties in Vritra’s stead. Like Vritra and Surtr, he’d once been a researcher named Naruhiko Seta. His second form was a winged lion, and as he’d once helped Lloyd train, the boy had admired him ever since.

Scratching his head, Satan explained why it was them and not Alka.

“See, Alka’s got her powers back, but she keeps going, ‘I still don’t feel like myself,’ and refuses to help with village work, which has become a whole problem. So she’s locked up right now. Since only Alka and I can teleport, the job fell on me.”

“That sounds like kid grandma. But what job are we talking about?”

“This,” Merthophan said. “The children I personally raised.”

He handed Lloyd some crops.

Lloyd took them with a heartfelt bow.

“Wow, thanks so much, Colonel Merthophan!”

“Ex-Colonel. Current Azami agricultural advisor and a Kunlun village farmer.”

The silver-haired, well-tanned man correcting Lloyd was Merthophan Dextro. During the Azami coup, he’d been brainwashed by Abaddon and had aided in the demon lord’s nefarious schemes. Sent to Kunlun to clear his crimes, he’d fallen in love with fieldwork and now cared little for anything but vegetables, like someone getting *waaaay* too into robot models during quarantine.

Grinning broadly, he started boasting about his “sons” (tomatoes and eggplants), and as he spoke, Lloyd bustled about the kitchen, preparing tea.

“Oh, don’t mind us, Lloyd.”

“You came all this way! Sit down, take your time. I’ll whip something up with one of these tomatoes.”

“Oh? Well, if you don’t mind.”

They both took a seat.

“Thanks, Lloyd... Oh, what’s this?”

Both visitors spotted the career path survey.

Having been a teacher and a colonel, Merthophan recognized it immediately.

“Survey time already? Bit early, isn’t it?”

Satan, meanwhile, saw signs of repeated erasures and remembered struggling with this himself in a former life.

“Yeah, I fretted for days. Caught between dreams and the attainable. Hard to fill in these blanks when you’re still making it up as you go along. One time, I even put down a girls’ school and got yelled at, ha-ha-ha.”

Marie seemed somewhat baffled by the idea of a demon lord’s school days.

“Huh...? You had options besides...demon lord? And that girls’ school thing is kinda...”

“Oh, forget I said anything, Marie.”

Lloyd returned with tea and refreshments.

“Here you go! Corn silk tea—made from the corn Colonel Merthophan gave us last time. And a simple tomato and cheese caprese salad.”

The work of mere minutes—it was no wonder he’d snared Marie.

“Oh, the tart tomatoes go perfectly with this cheese... And the olive oil!”

“The sweet scent of the corn tea grabs you by the nose! I’m pleased you’re making use of every part of the corn I raised, Lloyd.”

When Satan and Merthophan act like food critics, it’s surprisingly plausible. They both look like they belong on TV.

Lloyd folded up his apron, glancing at the survey again.

“I’m sure Shouma would have had this filled out in seconds.”

“Shouma?”

“Yes, he left the village before I did. He had dreams about becoming an adventurer or a world-class mage.”

“Oh, him,” Merthophan said, listening closely.



“But after a while, he came back, looking dejected. I didn’t know why and was all worried, but talking to me seemed to cheer him up. He found a new goal soon enough, and I really admired how he threw himself into that.”

“A new goal...? But that would be...?”

“Keeping Lloyd from experiencing his disappointment. In the worst way possible.”

They were whispering to each other.

“I’m glad he’s doing better,” Lloyd continued. “But he never comes home anymore, and he had this big fight with the chief... I’ve heard he’s hanging out with the wrong crowd. Oh!”

Realizing he was bringing the mood down, Lloyd cut himself off and turned to Satan.

“You said you struggled with your career path, Satan? I’m feeling quite lost right now, so any advice you could give would be helpful.”

Satan scratched his head again, similarly at a loss. “Advice? I’m not exactly a role model.”

“He’s been fretting all day,” Marie said. “Even demonic advice might help.”

“Demonic...? Well, I guess I am still technically a demon lord. Let’s see...”

Satan put a hand to his chin, thinking. He decided to start somewhere safe.

“If you’ve got no clue what you want to *be*, try thinking of what you want to *do*. Kind of a stock answer, but...”

“What I want to *do*...? Hmm...”

Sensing that Lloyd was going to be just as stuck on that, Satan smiled at him.

“You’re worrying about this too much, Lloyd! Overthinking doesn’t help. When someone asked me what I wanted to be, I wrote, ‘Famous.’”

The unexpected anecdote stunned everyone.

“That’s a fair reaction, but sometimes people don’t have a specific dream. I just wanted to be popular, rich, and fawned over...with no real direction. So I

wrote, 'Famous.' And I guess being a demon lord technically made my dream come true!"

"That's so half-assed," Marie muttered.

Satan made a goofy face, rolling with it.

"But even so, I tried different things, found what was right for me, and here I am today. You're far more serious than I ever was, Lloyd. Once you make your decision, you'll be unstoppable."

"You tried things out... You don't know what you can do, but you know doing nothing is worse."

"Good one," Satan said, taking a sip from his cup. "Yeah, if you're aimless, then don't be picky. Just try everything."

Lloyd was beginning to feel much better.

"Hmm," Merthophan said. "You're a surprisingly good teacher, Satan."

"Satan's already my mentor!"

"Hardly," Satan said, blushing. "All I'm saying is don't be as big a screwup as I was."

"That's not true," Marie said. "Talking about your own mistakes is the mark of a good teacher. I mean, mine..."

She made a face, but before she could say anything mean about Alka, the closet started shaking again. Out popped a little girl in a white robe—Chief Alka herself.

"Blegh! Lloyyyd! I couldn't stand not seeing you! I fought my way through the entire village to teleport here! Hot tea! Hot hugs! Hot kisses, please!"

"...is always like this."

"You have my sympathies, Marie."

Alka was indeed a mess, like she'd returned from the front lines of a war. Their very own inhuman kid grandma.

"What's wrong, Lloyd? I brought the forgotten crops! Me, the cutest fruit around!"

She attempted to dive into a full-body embrace, but Satan caught her.

“Target secured. I’ll haul this thing back to Kunlun. Merthophan, when should I pick you up?”

“Satan, I leave the chief and the fields in your hands. I have agricultural advisor duties to take care of, so let’s say one week from today.”

“Gotcha. Everyone, enjoy. And Lloyd, good luck.”

“Thanks!”

Alka was still squawking about something, but he covered her mouth—and with a *poof*, they were back in Kunlun.

“I’d best be going. Oh, right, Lloyd, cadets can do a trial job experience—an internship. That’s one means of determining the path that’s right for you. No need to rush into an answer.”

“That sounds great! I’ll put off answering for now and talk to Chrome about whether that’s an option.”

“Mmm, if you ask for it, I’m sure Chrome will bend over backward to help. Later!”

Merthophan was out the door, and Lloyd looked motivated at last.

“Okay! If I don’t know what I can do, then I’ll just have to try out several positions! Take any internships they’re offering! Until my mind’s made up.”

“Good luck, Lloyd! I’m cheering for you!”

No one here knew how much of a headache this request would cause Lloyd’s instructors.

A few days after Lloyd vowed to try *all* possible internships to be confident in his future path...

Chrome and Choline were in the faculty room, slumped against their desks. What had brought about this devastation?

“Hanging in there, people? Yo, Choline... Oh god! Didja accidentally eat something two weeks past the expiration date? Even my stomach can’t handle *that*. Gotta keep it to one!”

“.....”

Choline would normally have reacted with disgust at hearing even “one week,” but today, only her eyes managed to protest. She had no energy for anything else.

Mena peered at the career path forms in front of them and spotted the cause.

“If you’re not yelling, it must be bad... Ohhhhh, okay. Selen went with the avant-garde ‘girls with dreams want but one thing,’ and you rolled your eyes so hard, you sprained them? Is this a life goal? Or a song title?”

“That definitely gave me an ulcer, but that’s not it.”

“It’s not? Well, I did my job. I asked around, and everyone would love to welcome Lloyd. Won’t even need to lay the groundwork!”

Mena plopped down on a chair like her task was done, munching on the churro she’d brought with her.

“Mmph. Although it did seem like he was a bit *too* popular. I bet there’ll be a war brewing over who’ll get him... PR, security, and diplomacy in particular were all fired up. ‘Send him to an internship with us first!’ they all insisted. Let’s hope that doesn’t spell trouble.”

Chrome’s head swiveled like an uncoiled tin man’s.

“There’s no end to our troubles, Mena.”

“Fights are breaking out across the North Side, so they want us checking previous reports and increasing patrols, and we’ve been stuck doing that.”

They glowered at a mountain of paperwork with very cold eyes.

“Eaugh, what with everything you’ve already got going on? If they’re roping you two in...they’re not normal street fights, huh? It’s the real thing?”

Chrome nodded.

“They figured it was drunken tourists at first, but there’s too many. Most of the aggressors are just spewing insults and not even trying to hide, like they’ve had a breakdown. Just between us, we’re starting to suspect a curse.”

“A curse?”

Mena's eyes actually opened.

Chrome nodded gravely, opening a file. "The suspects were normal one day and the next, super aggressive or really depressed...and there's this weird, mottled pattern on their skin, like thorns. I took a look, but it's downright unsettling."

"Thorns...? That's not normal."

"So now there's rumors flying around about some mystery thorn curse, and we've been asked to pinpoint the cause."

"We're busy enough!" Choline wailed, at no one in particular.

"Right during internship season...or what we made internship season."

"It's all the king's fault! Why'd he have to—?! That's what's written all over your face, Chrome."

"D-don't put words in my mouth! I didn't say he always had lousy timing or make any remarks about his failure to let his kid fly the coop."

Choline's eyes narrowed. "Answering that fast just proves you've been thinking about this a lot! But I don't blame you for it."

"Okay, wrap up the pity party! The walls have ears...but frankly, I do agree."

The grumbling stopped, and there was a moment of exhausted silence.

"Um..."

Everyone jumped at the new voice.

"Er, we were just joking around..."

Denial proves guilt.

Chrome was making excuses before he even turned to look, but when he did, he found— "Um, sorry. I know everyone's busy. But I'm here!"

Lloyd, looking extremely remorseful.

Choline forced a laugh. "Oh, ah-ha-ha. How's it going, Lloyd? How much did you hear?"

"Hear? Is something wrong? If you're busy, I could—"

“Don’t worry,” Mena said, moving things forward. “You being here isn’t a problem. So? You finish up your survey?”

She’d spotted the page clutched in his hands, and all three hoped he was finally done.

“Chrome!” Choline whispered. “He’s made up his mind!”

“Thank god,” Chrome muttered. “Now we just need to arrange the internship...”

Smiles had appeared on both their faces. With all the problems on their plates, Lloyd’s career path was something they wanted to wrap up quickly.

“Well, Lloyd? What position did you settle on? PR? Security? Diplomacy? Royal Guard? If it’s the last one, get ready for me to work ya.”

Mena was peppering him with questions, miming a microphone, but he looked oddly somber.

“Uh...what’s up, Lloyd?” Chrome asked.

“Um...I hate to say this,” Lloyd explained, steadying his nerves. “But I just don’t know which path is right for me. So I was thinking I’d like to try out any and all positions I can.”

“Wait. Did you say ‘all’?”

“Yes! All of them. I thought that would be the best way to figure out which one is right for me!”

“““A-all of them...”””

No one had seen this coming, and they all had the same reaction.

This was supposed to be a simple task: see where Lloyd wanted to work and arrange a quiet trial run. Nothing more. Chrome was already frowning.

“Th-that would make the schedule... We’re kind of swamped with work right now...”

“I—I see...then, sorry. I just wanted to find out how I can best serve the Azami army and if I can really make myself useful to people.”

That sounded as genuine as it did disheartened.

He wanted to be of use but didn't know what he could do—that's why he wanted to try everything.

That was very Lloyd, so it hit the officers extra hard. Mena slapped Chrome on the back.

"Chrome, when a young man is genuinely trying to figure out his future, you can't just be going, 'Sorry, I'm busy.'"

"I'm thinking the same thing," Choline said. "It's an instructor's role to help guide our students through this stuff."

"True," Chrome said, his stone face relenting. "And he's helped me out before. If I don't try and pay that back now, when will I?"

He turned again to the boy.

"Lloyd, I've heard you loud and clear. We'll talk to the different departments and see how many we can set up for you."

Lloyd's face lit up.

"Th-thank you!" he exclaimed, bowing his head, then bounding out the door.

Choline watched him go, smiling as if he were her little brother. Then, she refocused.

"Right then. It's one thing after another these days, but let's make this work."

"Still...we can't have anyone knowing he's getting special treatment. It'll have to be in tandem with the upperclassmen. Which means shutting classes down and conferring with each individual bureau—and the scheduling alone will be pure hell..."

Each department had limited availability, and the thought of making that all go smoothly had Chrome looking rather faint.

"I can see it now! They're furious, yelling, 'We're too busy for interns now!' and Chrome's there, bowing his head..."

"Mena, you'll be bowing, too."

"I'll give that suggestion due consideration," she said, with all the blithe evasion of an experienced politician. Behind that lurked an ironclad

commitment to holding her head high.

Meanwhile, Choline was back on the thorn curse file.

“If we leave bowing to Chrome, then I’m... Ugh, a curse that makes you speak your mind? What a nightmare.”

“Yeah, if that curse hit you, lord knows what you’d say the next time you ran into Merthophan.”

Mena often poked fun at Choline’s crush, and it always provoked an outburst.

“Mena! Don’t!”

Chrome usually stayed out of it...but not today. Perhaps he needed to relieve his stress.

“Now, now, Mena, Choline’s actually made her feelings pretty clear. Merthophan is simply too dense to notice.”

“Et tu, Chrome?! But it’s true. No matter what I say to the man, anything unrelated to vegetables goes in one ear and out the other. Me getting cursed wouldn’t make a difference.”

“Mmm? Did I hear my name?”

“Eaughhhh!”

Speak of the farmer... In swept Merthophan. Choline nearly fell off her chair.

“I heard someone say ‘vegetables’! God, Choline, jumpy much? Is there an infestation in the stockpile’s rice bins? I told you to keep chili peppers in supply to ward those off.”

“No pests here! You won’t shut up about the peppers, so we’ve got fresh capsicum coming in weekly!”

Picturing Choline diligently swapping out the peppers for her love, Mena shed a tear.

“Such dedication, Choline! So what brings you here, Merthophan?”

“Taking care of agricultural advisor errands, when I happened to overhear—they tell me there’s some thorn curse going around? I wondered if my farming skills could help.”

Same old Merthophan; reliable as ever.

“Well, glad to have you,” Chrome said. “We could use your help with the curse and the intern schedule.”

“Mmm? Glad to assist. I just finished telling Lloyd to keep at it until he found what he wanted to do, so I’m happy to back that up. Though isn’t it a bit early for internsh—?”

““““So it’s *your* fault?!““““

They had to pull off the impossible and get Lloyd a trial at every position on short notice, and now they knew who to blame.

“Mmm? What’s got into you?”

The farmer himself was oblivious to the turmoil and simply looked baffled in the face of their scowls.

Choline threw an arm around him like a bully ready to extort, delivering his threat with all the grace of a grumble.

“Thing is, blah-blah-blah.”

“Ah. So even the king’s attention is on him now?”

Mena chuckled. “Like, eighty percent of that is trying to get the princess to move back home.”

Choline and Chrome started nodding halfway through.

“We really need the king to let his daughter go. We’re the ones caught up in the turmoil his doting causes.”

“Well, *sorry* for being a doting father.”

““““ ””””

It was starting to feel like they couldn’t mention someone without them walking in. Just as his underlings’ discussion was getting heated, the king himself stepped through the door, looking grim.

“I ran into him in the hall, and he came with me,” Merthophan explained, sheepishly.

“I swung by hoping for an update,” the king said, his eyes utterly dead. “And I catch you talking about me behind my back.”

“Er, Your Majesty, we weren’t—”

“Oh, I get it, trust me. I know this is a lot to ask. But I spent years being possessed and missed seeing my daughter grow up. I wish I could get that time back. The demon lord prevented us from growing apart naturally, so forgive me for struggling with it. Oh, Maria! Give your father a break!”

He visibly deflated as he spoke and trailed off into a sob. Clearly, he wasn’t in the best shape.

“He’s not even bothered by our rant.”

“He’s too far gone!”

“We’ll need to take action. To save the king, Chrome will have to do an apology tour of every division, entreating their help, armed with boxes of candy paid for out of his own pocket.”

“Too much burden on my nerves and wallet.”

This reminded the king of the need for regal dignity.

“An apology tour? Chrome, what did you do? Is it as bad as the time I ignored all arguments to the contrary and built a huge palace bath in hopes of luring Maria home?”

“How could it be?! Also, if she finds out you built that for her, I guarantee it’ll only make it harder to get her to come home.”

With that preamble out of the way, Chrome told the king about everything on their plates, the thorn curse included.

“So I’m about to hit up every division to see who’s willing to offer an internship.”

“This boy’s heart is in the right place!” the king declared, impressed.

Excited, he turned toward Chrome, clearly forgetting all their gripes.

“Chrome, make sure he can experience *every* department. Make it a plea tour! I’ll come with!”

“Er, um...personally?”

“But of course! I’ll go ask them without you, if need be! And ask them to be on the lookout for this thorn curse. Come, Chrome!”

“Your Majesty?! Sir, wait! Waiiiiit!”

Chrome was dragged by the arm out of the room.

“Didn’t think he’d be capable of dragging *Chrome*. The king’s health sure has improved!”

“Mmm. And it seems his majesty has fallen for Lloyd.”

“Well, he’s a very good boy. Anyone would.”

Beaming, they watched the king go...oblivious to the woman watching them from behind a pillar.

“Heh-heh-heh...excellent news.”

Her sinister smile was rather snakelike, but her jet-black hair and overall bearing screamed “dedicated career woman.” She was Riho’s former sister figure, Mena’s old boss, ex-headmaster of the Rokujou Sorcery Academy, and the current head of the Azami Intelligence Bureau—Rol Calcife.

She watched the other officers getting themselves fired up but not because she couldn’t join them. It wasn’t like she had *no* friends. For her own honor, that should be made clear.

Rol grinned, clearly up to something—and turned to leave.

“If the king’s got his eye on Lloyd, that’s an opportunity.”

What was Rol plotting? What lay behind this thorn curse? All will be revealed in the chaos of the intern arc!

Chapter 2

Obvious Favoritism: Like a Recruiter When a Promising Talent Comes to Tour the Company

At the Azami Military Academy, a trial experience at a potential future occupation—commonly referred to as an internship—was a fall tradition.

As with similar programs in civilian jobs, pre-graduate students would try their hands working at different military divisions, determining if a given bureau was right for them and attempting to sell themselves to their desired position.

Most cadets would test out two or three jobs based on their skills and aspirations, but there were a *lot* of students. Some might find themselves posted during peak rush and go through hell; others might find their desired position too popular and receive little to no individual attention; and unpopular departments might come across as too eager to recruit and leave the cadets feeling sorry for them. It was all somewhat chaotic.

Normally, this took place in the fall of the cadets' second year, but royal orders had moved the time line up and added the first-year students—so they had *twice* as many candidates, and getting the internships lined up for them had forced Chrome to call in a lot of favors. He'd kept his head bowed so low, he seemed perpetually on the verge of taking a knee.

All this because internships were *supposed* to be reserved for the second-years whose futures may well have depended on them. So if the first-years were joining... Well, that would build resentment and result in some wild speculation.

One second-year was extra mad, extra resentful, and extra suspicious.

"What does this mean? It's not even their turn!"

You guessed it! The head of the second-years, Micono Zol.

Along with her natural conceit and mad love for Marie, she had a one-sided

vendetta against Lloyd, which made her see the entire freshman class as competitors, and she was vehemently against this special treatment.

But she quickly engaged her positive thinking and began smirking in earnest. She took neither surprises nor criticism well but always recovered quickly.

“Fine! Perhaps this is a chance to show just what the second-years can do. Proving our skills will make Marie turn my— Lloyd Belladonna, you will be my stepping-stone.”

“Yes? You called?”

“Don’t answer when I’m talking to myself.”

He’d been walking right next to her the whole time, so this was highly unreasonable.

They were on the road between the military academy and the area housing many of the army’s major branches.

This was the first day of the internship program. Somehow, the division between the two classes had wound up with Lloyd and his usual pals—and Micona—all touring the departments together.

Riho glanced up at Micona’s scowl and nodded. “She’s just doing the whole, ‘Why are first-years getting internships? Special treatment? I don’t like it!’ thing.”

“.....Mmm,” Phyllo grunted. “.....And now she wants to prove how much better her year is, and she’s all fired up.”

“Don’t you dare read my mind,” Micona snapped. She did *not* deny it.

Micona’s motivations might have been obvious, but Selen was attempting to chastise her classmates.

“Ladies, this is an internship. No idle chatter on the job. We don’t want to bother anyone working.”

Allan gave her a puzzled look. This was not her usual self.

“You’re actually taking this seriously, Belt Princess?”

“Naturally,” Selen snorted. “A good impression here ensures the position of

our choice.”

“You’ve figured out where you want to go, Selen? Wow,” Lloyd said.

He gave her a look of great respect—especially since he still had no clue.

“Oh, Sir Lloyd...that passionate stare! Not in front of everyone.”

“And now everyone’s looking appalled, nice. But where do you wanna go, Selen?” Riho asked.

“I don’t particularly care.”

“.....Um.....it sounded like you did?”

“We’ll be married the moment we graduate, so it would never do to get assigned to the supply transport division and be forced into a long-distance relationship! I’ll do anything to avoid that disruption to our marital bliss.”

Everyone but Lloyd was speechless.

“Basically, I don’t wish to be separated from Sir Lloyd and my close companions,” Selen added. “So I want to ensure any and all divisions would welcome me.”

“Ah-ha-ha, yeah, it would be nice if we can all stick together.”

“.....I get that.”

“Yeah, you don’t wanna go back to being friendless.”

Lloyd’s group was always close, and though Micona usually grumbled about it, today she was nodding.

“Well put,” she said. “Making a bad impression might get me sent to frontier security, and I’d never see Marie again. This is no time to be fighting among ourselves. For the sake of all our futures, let’s work together and impress them.”

It was questionable whether Micona and Marie counted as “close companions,” but at least she was feeling cooperative.

She held out her hand, and Lloyd, Selen, Riho, and Phyllo placed theirs on top.

“All together!”

“““““Yeah!”“““““

Allan alone was hanging back.

“Um, can I get in on that?”

“Oh? I thought you wanted to get away from your wife so much, you’d be trying to make a bad impression and get yourself posted to some rusty outpost in the boonies.”

“Your phrasing! And frontier security is important! I just think some distance between us would be healthy. My first choice is the diplomatic division!”

“Going into diplomacy to get away from Renge?” Micona scoffed. “You have no clue how hard their work is, do you? They pay top wages and require insane skills. One of the most difficult divisions to enter, and that’s what you choose? You are complete scum, and that’s putting it lightly.”

Allan was visibly shrinking throughout this tirade.

“I...hear your point loud and clear. But that’s just how bad and controlling she is! She showed me a life plan covered in tiny handwriting and asked me to help name our future kids!”

“The ideal marriage!”

Selen’s opinion was of no use to anyone. She could sing Renge’s praises all day without winning anyone over to her side. Even Lloyd was cringing.

Be that as it may, the group had reached the site of their first internship.

It could not have been further from the image of a military facility. The halls were covered in advertisements, posters, slogans, and mascots.

Lloyd checked his itinerary, wondering where they were.

“Um, our first stop...is the PR department! They advertise events, distribute a monthly newsletter telling everyone what the king and the army have been up to, and try to ensure people have a high opinion of our military.”

“Oh, Rol told me about this. They work closely with her intelligence department’s information manipulation, trying to put a positive spin on things. They’re the main culprits behind grabbing some cadet named ‘Allan’ and

inflating him into the 'new hope.' Clearly, room for improvement."

Allan was making a face, but since it was all true, they were, for the most part, guilty.

"Cut me some slack, merc. I didn't ask for it!"

"What's that? That whole celebrity blues thing? 'I didn't ask to be famous! I just wanted a normal life!' Gross."

Micona was *not* holding back today.

"I didn't mean it like that!" he sputtered. "This isn't any 'It's so hard to be famous; I only sleep two hours' thing!"

"Hmph. Well, no need to concern yourself. Today, the head of the second-years will make a dazzling impression, and they'll be putting Micona Zol in the limelight instead."

"So much for the cooperative spirit. Why did we even huddle like a team?"

"I meant we won't be tripping each other up. Playing fair and square will still leave me with a clear advantage! I'm bound to make a great impression."

Even without direct conflict, she still had a very high opinion of herself.

Meanwhile, Phyllo was looking around the fancy decor, a hint of discomfort on her usual poker face.

".....An office.....advertisements.....maybe not my thing."

Lloyd gave her a pat on the back.

"Too soon to talk like that. You might have a hidden talent! Just do what you can. I plan to!"

".....If you say so, Master."

The moment they stepped through the doors...

"Welcome, welcome, welcome!"

The PR director was extremely pleased to see them.

So much so, the cadets all looked rather stunned. Normally, they'd be the ones bowing their heads, grateful for the opportunity to learn.

Instead, they were ushered into an upholstered lounge and offered tea and cake, confusing them even more.

This was less a “welcome” and more a “pampering” situation.

Micono grew concerned.

“What is this? Some sort of elaborate test? Do we get points docked if we eat?”

Meanwhile, Phyllo didn’t hesitate to dig in. Always a bottomless stomach.

“.....It’s good.”

“Phyllo Quinone, try not to do anything rash. If any one of us slips up, the whole group might get penalized.”

“.....Don’t worry, I checked for poison. Perfectly rational.”

“That wasn’t what I meant!”

Despite Micono’s fears, the director was happily urging them to eat.

“So glad you’re here! Lloyd, Allan, and your friends. I’m the head of PR. No need to hold back! Enjoy the tea.”

Looking closer, they remembered him from the Military Festival.

He was one of the many bigwigs from the Special Case Countermeasure Headquarters, and he’d spent most of his time wailing about harming the military’s reputation or how this was throwing all the money they’d spent down the drain. A very transparent individual.

But now he was smiling broadly, first buttering up Allan.

“Thanks for joining us on that morale tour, Allan.”

“N-no problem,” Allan replied, shifting awkwardly. A tad too nervous?

“Those posted to the frontiers were much more motivated after a cheer from the Dragon Slayer himself! And I enjoyed the many gourmet specialties of the provinces— Oops, don’t tell anyone I said that.”

“Ah-ha-ha-ha...”

“Like you suggested, the next tour we’re planning will take us through the hot

springs and coastal seafood hubs. It's going to be grand."

"G-glad to hear it."

Mere minutes ago, Allan had insisted he was suffering, and now they were hearing all about how he'd wined and dined on the kingdom's dime. Lloyd was grimacing, and the girls were livid.

"Is it *hard* to stuff your face on a morale tour? It sure sounds like *fun* to me."

".....You could never be a politician."

"He would dive right into the first honey trap."

"Absolute scum."

Allan was turning steadily redder.

"Don't," Lloyd said—and the director turned to him.

"Lloyd Belladonna," he began.

"Eep? Er, yes?"

Lloyd had clearly not expected to be addressed directly and immediately sat upright.

The man firmly gripped Lloyd's hand and launched into a stream of praise for how he had handled the Military Festival incident.

"Lloyd! That mess at the festival was saved solely by your intervention. I could not be more in your debt."

"Um, okay? But I didn't really do much."

What exactly had Lloyd done? Rescued the kidnapped king and shattered a stone demon lord before its rampage could get out of hand—so definitely *a lot*.

But now their host was lauding Lloyd's reflexive modesty.

"I speak only the truth, Lloyd! Our military needs you! You're our hope! Our superstar! You're every bit as great a man as Allan here!"

Obvious preferential treatment. Excessive compliments. Lloyd wasn't the only one looking askance.

The PR director smoothly advanced the conversation to ask Lloyd for favors

disguised as work experience.

“And since you’re here for your internship, there’s something I’d like to ask of you. Given the cold war with Jiou and all the problems at home lately, we need to convince people the military is working hard for them!”

That was clearly a huge burden to dump on anyone.

“I don’t know if I can help with *that*,” Lloyd said. “I think Allan would be better suited for the task.”

“No, no, that’s not the case. I promise.”

There was a grim note to the last word that made everyone brace themselves.

But the man pressed on, oblivious.

“It’s almost cold and flu season! The military medics have asked for a reminder campaign. I want you on the poster, Lloyd!”

Selen was already nodding.

“Absolutely. There would be no point putting Allan on a poster urging people to wash their hands! I mean, look at him. He clearly never washes his hands after he goes! Anyone who saw it would think, ‘What a liar! He’s never even washed his FACE!’”

“Sorry to disappoint you, but I *do* actually wash my hands *and* face.”

Paying them absolutely no attention, the director remained focused on Lloyd.

“We’re counting on you to reduce the number of infections! Please!”

Faced with all this, Lloyd nodded, his mind made up.

“If it’ll save lives, then I’d be happy to help. What is it you’d like me to do?”

“Put this on!” The PR bigwig held up a nurse outfit.

“I’m going home. Thanks for having us!” Lloyd rose to leave.

He brushed straight past the man smiling over a pink dress.

Micono stopped him, her grin widening.

“Where are you going, Lloyd Belladonna? Did you not just say you’d be happy to help? Help by putting on that nurse uniform!”

“It’s the wrong uniform! At least make it a hospital attendant’s!”

A reasonable request, but Micona was motivated by spite, not reason.

“It would look so good!”

“It’s a legitimate advertising strategy. Very attention-grabbing.”

“.....I’d wash my hands.”

The other girls just wanted Lloyd in that outfit and made no attempt to hide it.

Between everyone insisting he’d look great and his own promise to try anything...Lloyd finally caved. Half desperation, half stubborn pride.

“All right...I’ve got plenty of problems with it, but if it’ll help the citizens...”

As if his word was a binding contract, he was immediately pointed to the changing room.

“Come, Lloyd! The people demand you wear this nurse outfit! Don’t worry. We took your measurements during the Military Festival, so it should fit in all the right places, and the miniskirt is a full four inches above the knees!”

No one had any idea how the cosplay-loving, glasses-wearing second-year student got here, but she was *not* letting go of Lloyd’s arm.

“Why are you here?! And a miniskirt?! Is that necessary?!”

“Men harbor infinite possibilities.” She pushed her glasses up.

With that, Lloyd was shoved into the changing room and forced to put on his first-ever nurse outfit.

A few minutes later...

Snap! Snapsnap! Snapsnapp!

The PR building’s studio was filled with the sound of camera shutters.

The subject: Lloyd Belladonna.

In a tight pink miniskirt nurse uniform.

It looked less like medical precaution poster prep and more like a dubious underground idol shoot.

Lloyd was entirely unprepared for this predicament; mortification had him one step away from outright panic.

“Very good, Lloyd! The perfect expression! Your adorableness will make the army’s popularity skyrocket!”

The PR director was spitting praise so vehemently, it would have made *any* model cringe.

Selen was somehow among the photographers, snapping away with her own camera, likely for personal use.



“Sir Lloyd! Eyes this way! Perfect!”

Riho and Phyllo did not approve.

“Restrain yourself, Selen. You need to try resisting your baser urges once in a while.”

“.....Mmm.”

But Selen merely arched a brow.

“Oh? I was planning on printing extras for the two of you. But if you don’t want them...”

“Lloyd! All experiences teach us something! Bear with it!”

“.....Mmm!”

So easily bribed. No one from this group should ever be in politics.

Meanwhile, Allan had been given a bounce board and was carefully adjusting it, doing his best to keep Lloyd looking pretty.

“Lloyd, as your student, this is all I can do for you! They don’t call me the Lighting King for nothing! I’m going to do my best to make you look beautiful!”

“That’s never been a goaaaal!”

“Fear not, Lloyd! Hah!”

Oblivious to Lloyd’s protests, Allan kept passionately providing favorable lighting—annoying everyone.

Once, on a movie set, he’d received a full course of training in cinematographic assistance, and he had always been one of those who leaped at the slightest provocation to show off his skill set.

But the wilder the studio got, the more flummoxed Lloyd became.

“Why is everyone so excited? This is just a public health campaign!”

“Perfect pout... Next, try holding out your hands beseechingly!” Glasses girl pushed her frames up again.

The cosplay lady was now directing his poses.

“Good! Make sure your eyes glisten with a look that says, ‘Please wash your hands.’”

“Boss, if we want pleading eyes, we need a high angle!”

“Someone fetch a tripod—stat!”

The PR director was now running errands for the bespectacled second-year. Who was in charge here?

“The intern’s dictating poses, and the director is at her beck and call? Does chain of command mean nothing here?!”

Even *Lloyd* was raising his voice, but everyone was a prisoner of their desire and unable to hear a word.

Meanwhile, back in Kunlun...

“*Hngg.*”

“Alka, these fields won’t work themselves! Keep those hands moving!”

“I just had this feeling Lloyd was in a tight miniskirt and blushing... Satan, we need to put a pause on farmwork.”

“Where’d that come from, Alka?! There’s no way that would ever happen! I know you’re desperate to get out of this, but at least try to come up with a believable excuse!”

“*Hngg*, let go of me! It’s the truth! Lloyd’s in a nurse uniform and is hitting peak shame! He’s trying to protest, but nobody will listen! He’s about to cry! I’m sure of it!”

“If you’re that delusional, I *really* can’t let you leave! Why do you insist on being such a handful?!”

But Alka’s drag radar was in perfect working order.

They may have kept him posing for the better part of an hour, but the shoot *did* eventually end with everyone functionally intact.

“Ah, such great shots! Thank you, Lloyd! This guarantees a monumental spike in the Azami army’s popularity!”

“F-from a health campaign? This was never about the army...”

Lloyd was still beet red. He may not have emerged “intact.”

The PR director took no notice of his slumped posture or heaving shoulders, though. Perhaps this was a vital skill in becoming a big shot.

Glasses girl seemed immensely satisfied and was alternating nods with spectacle shoves.

“Your looks will set hearts afire!” Another spectacle shove.

“She’s one of mine, but...her dedication to her own lusts is downright disturbing.”

Even *Micono* was shuddering, but glasses girl was just slipping her personal stash of photos inside her uniform pocket.

Wiping the sweat from his brow, Lloyd tried to convince himself of the greater good.

“This...is a trial that’s been set before me. I knew coming in that I would have to try things that weren’t for me and suffer for it. All part of the growing process. I have to...tell myself that, or...I’ll never make it.”

That was getting a bit too real.

Phyllo looked at the boy’s hollow eyes and muttered, “.....This position isn’t for me.”

“If it’ll end up like this all the time, I don’t want in, either,” Riho agreed, with a side-eye at Selen’s flushed face and Allan’s self-satisfied back-patting.

“Do keep the nurse outfit, Lloyd! I’ll be waiting for you here!” Glasses push.

“Mmm, join us, Lloyd! Oh, let me get your autograph on these photos—gifts to your fans...perhaps a raffle prize... Either way—sign away!”

Glasses girl and the PR director handed Lloyd the nurse outfit and a bag of Polaroids, and his eyes went dead.

“Um...who are you anyway?” he asked, looking at glasses girl. “Aren’t you here for an internship?”

“This department allows me to put my interests to practical use, so I’m already employed part-time. I intend to work here after graduation, too.”

“I—I see... Well, I’m glad you know what you want to do.”

She responded with an extra-emphatic version of her signature gesture and turned to her boss, ordering him around. “Come, boss, the next stage. We need to work on slogans for the posters, right?”

“Oh, good point! Slogans that capture the hearts of females in their twenties. I know you all have a different internship this afternoon, so good luck with that. I hope we’ll see you back here again, Lloyd, Allan.”

He sent them all away with a broad smile.

Lloyd slumped off, head down.

“The PR division was an absolute delight!”

“Belt Princess, you’re just happy you got to take all the photos you wanted,” Allan scoffed. He then turned to his ostensible mentor. “Lloyd, you look tired. I’ll carry those photos for you!”

“Oh, thanks...,” Lloyd said weakly.

“That’s only the first stop on our trek, Lloyd Belladonna!” Micona snapped. “Be more like Riho Flavin and Phyllo Quinone! Backs straight!”

They were probably just looking at Lloyd’s photos. You know how you automatically straighten up when beholding objects of worship. Like a boy who has yet to build an immunity to porn.

The group set out, bound for their next internship of the day.

“Where are we going, Lloyd?”

“Next up is the security department. Whew. *They* won’t make me do anything weird...”

Azami domestic security.

The army had many security departments—border security, naval security, magic crime countersecurity, and more. All protected the safety of citizens, but the division they were visiting today was essentially Azami’s police force.

They were in charge of both crime and local monster control and thus the military division with which the average citizen had the most contact.

“.....Let me at 'em.”

The party's most proactive fighter was clearly fired up, even if it didn't show on her face. She looked ready to punch the first cop inside the door, really.

“Phyllo, we're not here to take on all comers,” Allan warned.

“But this is the training facility,” Lloyd said, looking daunted. “They might put us through the wringer. Augh, I'm shaking already.”

“Ugh, training?” Riho made a face. “We do plenty of that in class already. Last thing we need is more...”

“Bring it.” Micona smiled from ear to ear. “Why the long faces, Lloyd Belladonna? Riho Flavin? I may be the only one here with a lick of sense, but each of you is far stronger than the average soldier. This is the perfect chance to prove ourselves!”

“Nobody with a demon lord's power gets to talk smack about sense...”

Micona had the ability to grow wings or tentacle-like tree roots whenever she wanted. She did *not* get to pass herself off as the sane one.

That ended the discussion.

Wondering what lay in wait, they stepped through the doors to find the stern face of the security chief waiting for them.

“We've been expecting you all,” he said.

Everyone recognized him as another bigwig from the festival and snapped to attention. He'd been far more composed than the PR director—so much so, it was rude to compare them.

“No need to be so stiff.” He grinned, shaking each hand in turn. A much more ordinary greeting, but that actually made them sweat more.

“What now? He seems legit.” *Gulp.*

“.....Yes, the real deal.” *Gulp.*

Selen and Phyllo weren't being especially polite, but given who they'd had to contend with that morning, this was understandable.

The chief sighed, aware where this was coming from.

“You’re coming from the PR department, yes? I can imagine why your guards are up. Don’t worry, we’re much more normal.”

The more ordinary things seem on the surface, the more worried you should be about what lies hidden underneath.

“The director tends to...well, he’s pretty much always getting carried away. But I’m genuinely grateful for your efforts at the festival. Especially yours, Lloyd. We won’t be making you do anything too crazy.”

Seeing where the attention was being directed, Micona scowled. “Tch, I worked hard myself! But Lloyd Belladonna steals all the limelight.”

“So what does this internship involve? No more photos, right?”

That poster shoot had left Lloyd scarred for life, and that was the first question on his lips.

“Don’t worry,” the chief reassured him. “Domestic security generally doesn’t do anything or make you do anything weird. We’re simply going to give you some training they don’t provide at the academy—something closer to the job itself.”

“.....Oh?” Phyllo rolled up her sleeves.

“Ha-ha-ha!” The chief laughed. “That didn’t mean hands-on combat. More how to act as a bodyguard or how to begin questioning potential suspects.”

“I have been interrogated countless times. I know how to question, how to be questioned, and how to run away.”

Selen looked immensely proud of something that really shouldn’t have elicited pride. She had long been on the guard’s blacklist for stalking, so this was basically like a hacker showing off to get the cops by breaching their cyberterrorism task force’s firewall in an attempt to get hired.

The chief’s eyelid twitched, but he persevered. “We’d certainly love you to sit for a lecture on *that*, but your training for today is already set in stone. Same for all the interns.”

“So what are we learning?” Lloyd asked.

“How to inspect suspicious parcels and how to deal with suspicious individuals

or their belongings. Given the tensions with the Jiou Empire, there's a strong possibility they have agents attempting to infiltrate us. Everyone needs training on these subjects. There's been one too many strange incidents lately."

The PR director had mentioned the same thing.

"We heard that this morning," Riho said. "What are we talking about, specifically?"

"Don't tell anyone else," the chief said, and once they'd nodded, he explained. "There's been an awful lot of fights on the North Side. Mostly tourists. Yelling insults, emotionally unstable...and the culprits have all had a faint pattern on their skin that looks like thorns. We've been calling it the thorn curse."

"Ominous. I wonder if it works like the curses our village chief puts on Marie...," Lloyd muttered.

The chief took that as a joke and mustered a smile, unaware that it was the truth.

"Ha-ha-ha... Well, it might all just be a coincidence. We don't want to alarm the public, so keep this among us."

He began leading them deeper into the training building. Unlike the cadet training facility, this was more like a gym—only the bare minimum of equipment.

Inside, they found a large number of soldiers lined up and chattering—but the moment the chief entered, everyone instantly went quiet.

"Wow, there's a lot of 'em," Riho observed. "They're all security?"

"That's right." The chief grinned. "Only a fraction of our domestic forces. If we brought them all in for training, there'd be nobody on the job, and they'd never fit anyway. If you threw in naval or border security—well, we'd need several extra buildings."

"Wow, that's...a lot of people to look after."

Riho gave him a sympathetic look.

"Ha-ha-ha! So we're always scouting promising talent. Oh?"

Several of the soldiers were looking at Selen and muttering.

“From the blacklist!” “The cursed stalker, Selen!” “She brought a case of firebombs to the border and fled the Rokujou border guards!”

“Hmph,” Selen snorted. “It seems our reputation precedes us. They look suitably impressed.”

“Don’t try and make it plural, Belt Princess.”

Selen had always been great at putting positive spins on things and confusing cries of welcome with shrieks of horror.

Somewhat rattled by this, the chief urged the interns to line up.

“Places, everyone! Interns, line up! Baggage at your feet, please.”

All soldiers present formed ranks.

The security chief stepped forward and saluted.

The training room seemed very professional.

“Listen up. As I’m sure you’ve all heard, today’s training will be checking suspicious objects, individuals, and their possessions. Most of you have done this before, but give it your full attention. Rumor has it a strange curse is running around and causing problems. We can’t be sure this isn’t Jiou’s doing, so diligence is in order.”

""""""Yes, sir!""""""

The chief went on for a while about Jiou undermining the nation's power and how this department's performance reassured the citizens.

It was less a greeting than a full-fledged speech, and just as Riho muttered, “He’s as bad as Merthophan,” they finally got around to training.

“—And that’s why we brought you here to train. First up, we’re doing frisks and baggage checks.”

One intern pounced on the word “frisk.”

“Me, me, me! I wanna frisk Sir Lloyd!”

Selen Hemein *belonged* on that blacklist. She did *not* let a chance to touch

Lloyd slip by.

Riho and Phyllo each grabbed an arm as she huffed away. The chief was visibly sweating now, urging calm.

“Hold your horses, Selen. We have a special instructor here today. Come in!”

In answer to his call, Renge Audoc came in, chief of Ascorbic Domain’s Audoc clan, clad in an Azami military uniform.

“Gah, Renge!” Allan yelled, flinching at the sight of his demon bride.

Renge bowed elegantly, addressing the crowd.

“Renge Audoc, special instructor. I’ve assisted with your daily combat practice before, and today, I’ll be assisting with this internship exercise. Let’s all practice the basics of inspecting suspicious individuals and baggage. Thank you.”

Riho was getting the sense that the security troops were looking more nervous by the minute.

“She’s as tough a drill driver as they say, then?” she whispered. “Bad as Chrome?”

“.....Her skills are even with the Ascorbic Domain’s leader, Anzu, so...”

“First, allow me to deliver a most elegant lecture.”

Renge’s eyes flicked toward Allan.

Meanwhile, Selen was being Selen.

“Enough talking! I’m pairing up with Sir Lloyd! Who will grope who? The choice is yours!”

“No, uh...this isn’t about...,” Lloyd stammered.

“Selen,” Renge interjected, smiling pleasantly. “The army is all about following appropriate regulations these days, and mixed-gender frisking is a sexual harassment liability. Do restrain yourself.”

This was exactly what a teacher should say, and Selen actually backed down.

“Very well. I shall restrain myself...for now. We can always practice more at home, Sir Lloyd.”

“Much too optimistic, Mistress—*gah!*”

Selen silently tied her belt into a bow.

“Our policy is that inspections should always be performed by a guard of the same sex unless circumstances leave you with no choice.”

Micona was looking increasingly upset. “Oh, if only Marie were here...”

“.....She’s not a soldier.”

Only one of many things wrong with that thought.

Renge shot them another look, moving her lecture along.

“I shall demonstrate the basic approach. Allan, step forward.”

“Whyyyy? Do I *have* to?”

Allan looked rather ill, but Renge didn’t bat an eye.

“I can hardly demonstrate proper frisking techniques without a partner. Make it elegant.”

Grabbing faster than the human eye can see, she dragged his body forward, as if she’d caught him shoplifting.

Legs shaking like a newborn deer, he kept sputtering.

“Renge! You just finished explaining the policy! These circumstances leave you with plenty of choice!”

“Yes, exactly,” she said.

“Huh?”

Allan was now thoroughly lost.

“This training is for those unique circumstances. Specifically, cases where a female guard is forced to frisk a male suspect. Not common, yet not unheard of.”

“But does it have to be now?”

“It does. Having my husband here to demonstrate is a rare and exquisite opportunity. Or are you hiding something? No? Then, everyone, take notes.”

“Er, um...uh...”

Ignoring his stammering, Renge began calmly and professionally explaining the procedure.

“Begin by checking the jacket for unusual bulges. If they smoke, check the cigarettes. The wallet always warrants a look. If they regularly pick up the tab in shops of ill repute, they’ll likely have that shop’s card on them, having entirely forgotten that detail.”

Micono, Selen, and Phyllo all shuddered.

“This isn’t a body search! It’s how to catch a cheater!”

“That *is* an unavoidable circumstance. A particular necessity!”

“.....Cabarets count as cheating.”

Renge had now abandoned all pretense of a frisk, hunting for evidence of infidelity.

Many female guards were furiously taking notes, and some of the men were looking very shifty.

“Renge, I don’t think this is—,” the chief began.

But Renge and the note-taking women (presumably those with husbands or boyfriends) all shot him such a glare that he quickly surrendered.

With that obstacle dealt with, she moved on to the next phase.

“Inspect the neck for hickeys or a whiff of strange perfume. Detergents these days are often scented, so he may have erased the evidence with a scented towel. Any fragrance different from your home’s detergent may be a warning sign. Hmm, but no such thing here. That’s my Allan!”

All clear on perfume and hickeys. The wallet search had uncovered only a smile-worthy four-leaf clover.

“And that’s how to check if your husband’s cheating.”

“Ah-ha-ha, you’re not even pretending now.”

“No wonder she picked Allan. Nothing like a surprise inspection.”

“.....In public.....leaving him no escape if caught.....cunning.”

Renge bowed before vigorous applause from *some* women, leaving everyone else with a rather horrified grin.

Meanwhile, several men were surreptitiously checking their wallets and sniffing their collars.

But just as everyone thought it was over, Renge continued to phase two.

“It’s not over yet!”

“It isn’t?!”

Allan was looking somewhat desperate, but nothing he said was getting through. This woman was a rock.

“Now we have to inspect his belongings. You can never tell where evidence of infidelity might lie. Steel your heart and dig in.”

“This really isn’t what frisking means, Renge...,” the chief groaned.

This fell on deaf ears. She was hunkered over, peering into the paper bag at Allan’s feet.

It was the bag he’d taken from Lloyd—the one with the nurse outfit and the set of photos.

“Ack, wait, Renge, that’s...”

Picture it in your hearts, everyone. The bag your beloved husband was cradling contains photos of a boy in a nurse uniform—*and* the uniform in question.

“



Doom was inevitable.

“Now, let me explain, Renge.”

“Ahem, and that’s the end of the elegant infidelity inspection lecture.”

“Listen, Renge, everything in there is—”

“We’ll now move on to dealing with the discovery of your husband’s unusual predilections. To the combat arena! Where we will demonstrate how to give your husband the beating of his durn life!”

Thus, Allan’s short life came to a sudden and terrible end.

“Renge! Your accent! And there’s a good reason for this!”

“If there wasn’t, that’d be worse! Spit it out! Are you running from me into a man’s arms?!”

“Not at all! They’re from a military PR shoot! Those photos—”

“The military don’t have no durn cross-dressing nurses!”

This one did.

“I knew that was the normal response...,” Lloyd whispered. He had clearly never been fully convinced.

“Mah guts were screaming warning signs! I thunk for one second that we had a mutual understanding of wedded bliss, of what bein’ together meant! I gotta beat love into yer very spine again!”

“Uh, Renge! Earth to Renge?! Aughhhh!”

Renge clamped her hand round the scruff of his neck and dragged Allan out of the training tower.

“A hunch, a surprise search, and the punishment...such ferocious love.”

“She’s finally made even you cringe, Selen Hemein?”

Micona looked genuinely surprised. Renge might well be out-stalking the stalker.

“Welp, it’s their problem. Let ’em sort it out.”

“.....Mmm.”

The other girls were already abandoning Allan to his fate.

Once Renge was gone, the chief began the intended lesson, and the first day of their internship drew to a close.

One fatality (Allan) and one psychological injury (Lloyd)—so not the best results.

Lloyd felt even further from his goals. The nurse uniform had left him feeling lost in the dark.

What could he do?

What should he aim for?

Lloyd was more lost by the second.

He'd thrown himself into the first day, ready to try everything.

The nurse outfit had caught him entirely off guard.

While Lloyd was still reeling from that, Renge had come after Allan for infidelity—and the day ended.

All Lloyd got out of it was a nurse uniform and pictures to sign later.

He split off from the others and headed home, looking dismal.

Occasionally, he muttered, “It’s just the first day!” in an effort to cheer himself up—but that was soon followed by, “But what if they’re all like this?” His mood swung up and down, highly unstable. He was like a new hire who’d messed up badly on his first day, even though he’d done nothing wrong.

A young man was watching him from around a corner, looking worried.

“What happened to you, Lloyd?” Shouma whispered.

A Kunlun villager whose healthy tan and bandanna were pretty distinctive.

He was supposedly a courier and came across like a cheery boy from the neighborhood—but he was actually working with Eug to unleash demon lords and plunge the world into chaos.

Lloyd had left the strongest village to become a soldier like the one from his

novel. Shouma was just trying to make the world dangerous enough that Lloyd could find satisfaction and fulfillment outside Kunlun instead of slinking back home, dejected by the weakness of ordinary folk—the way Shouma himself had. That might sound like a good thing, but since he didn't care what happened to anyone *but* Lloyd, it was tough to call it *love*.

Shouma often swung by to watch over his “little brother”—and Lloyd's behavior today was cause for concern.

“Lloyd, depressed? What did they do? *Gasp!* Unwanted advances?! He *is* cute! I may have to level the kingdom.”

The scary part was—he totally *could* do that. Not to mention the fact that this was his first inclination.

Shouma came out of hiding, running up and slapping Lloyd on the back.

“Yo, wazzup, Lloyd!”

“Augh—oh! Shouma?! Where'd you come from?”

The last person he'd expected to see, but Shouma's breezy smile blew away his shock.

“Kid, you're looking all down in the dumps! I just had to come running over.”

“Oh...hey, when are you gonna stop fighting with Chief Alka? Everyone wants you home!”

“Ah-ha-ha, such passion! But seriously, what's wrong? Not like you to look so sad.”

A cloud passed over Lloyd's expression.

“Someone make a pass at you?! I knew you were too cute for this world! Who do I set on fire?”

“Why would you even think that?! Don't set anyone on fire! Seriously, that's not it. I just... I'm trying to figure out my career.”

“Ohhhh,” Shouma said, nodding several times. “Well, that is worth worrying about. Hey, do you have time now?”

“Hmm? Um, a little.”

“Then come hang out with me... Oh, that shop looks good! This Satan dude’s been stealing my thunder lately, so I gotta earn me some big brother points.”

Are these relationship points a new fad, or...?

“What are *those*?”

“Nothing! Never mind. C’mon, that ice coffee’s not gonna drink itself. Bring on the heat!”

“Ha-ha, ice coffee isn’t hot.”

They stepped into the café.

“Barista! Gimme an ice coffee. Lloyd, what’ll you have?”

“Same.”

“Then make it two!”

The coffee arrived at their table moments later, and Shouma took a swig, grinning fondly.

“It feels like ages!” he said. “When was the last time we got to just sit and talk?”

“You’re so busy all the time, Shouma. Not just that courier job, is it? What have you been up to?”

“Ha-ha-ha, I *am* busy, but it’s all passionate stuff! Doesn’t even give me time to sleep.”

Lloyd was blissfully unaware that Shouma was trying to unleash demon lords for his benefit.

He tried to get details, but Shouma just made a show of yawning, quickly shifting the conversation back to Lloyd’s career.

“So what exactly is the problem with your career, here? You wanna be like the soldier in the novel I gave you, right? Proper protagonist material, all heroic. I figure that’s a pretty clear goal!”

“Yeah, but...that soldier was all about fighting for his homeland. He was out battling with ancient weapons to save the kingdom or against monsters to help villages he passed through—and that’s really more what adventurers do.”

“Ohhh,” Shouma said. “I guess it was kind of a kid’s book that way.”

“And fighting for the country or the people—I’m doing the training and studying to be like that hero, but when it comes to deciding a specific posting, it’s...awfully nebulous. Security? Royal guard? Rescue work? I think and think and don’t get anywhere.”

“Well, glad it isn’t anyone putting the moves on ya anyway. No need for pyrotechnics!”

Shouma made it sound like a joke, but, pupils dilated, his eyes were dead serious.

“So right now, we’re doing internships, and I said I wanted to do them all to find the right position for me.”

“Wow! Very you, Lloyd. Run the whole board! Passion!”

“But today’s internship somehow involved me dressing as a nurse in a poster photo shoot. Kinda took the wind out of my sails.”

“I knew someone was taking advantage of you!”

“Okay, sort of, but...don’t set anyone on fire, please. That stuff really isn’t funny.”

Lloyd just looked very tired. He showed Shouma the contents of the gift bag, and Shouma’s eyes got grim again.

“I’ll make sure these get taken care of,” he offered.

But for a different reason.

“Those you can totally burn,” Lloyd said.

“You have my word. The deed will be done.”

Maybe not the way Lloyd thought. Shouma and the chief had a lot in common, really.

“The poster was supposed to help people avoid getting the flu...and then after that, we went to domestic security, and the training there was chaos. I just kept thinking, ‘Is *this* what I wanted to do?’ Maybe my motivations are immature.”

He was looking pretty crestfallen.

So Shouma reached out and squeezed his cheeks.

“Shouma! I’m not a little kid anymore.”

“Ha-ha-ha, I used to do that to you all the time. You loved it back then. Oh, and when you got hurt, I did the whole, ‘Pain, pain, go away!’ thing, and that always stopped you crying.”

“It did, but—argh.”

Shouma smiled and let go of Lloyd’s cheeks. He clapped a hand firmly on his shoulder.

“Don’t beat yourself up, Lloyd! Nothing wrong with being childish. You’re the one who put the fire back in my heart, remember? Don’t you go telling me that’s wrong.”

Shouma started speaking passionately about the old days.

Getting treated like a kid again reminded Lloyd of how it had felt when he first read that novel, helping him regain a part of his childhood.

“Right...right! Immature or not, that doesn’t matter. I just have to do what I can. I’m only getting started! With these internships and with my time as a cadet!”

As the cloudy mood disappeared, Shouma’s grin widened.

But then, he muttered to himself, “A specific goal, huh? If I’d had one of those, maybe I wouldn’t have ended up like this.”

“Mmm? What was that?”

“Oh, nothing. I know I can sleep in peace now! Glad you figured things out, Lloyd. You have a passionate soul.”

“When did you start saying that word so much? You didn’t use to.”

“Uh, well... Wait, are you sure you still have time?”

“Time? Ah! It’s really late! Marie will be getting hungry. Shouma, thanks for the coffee! I gotta run!”

Lloyd jumped to his feet and took a step toward the door. Then, he turned back once more.

"It was fun talking like we used to," he said. "You should stop by more often, Shouma."

"I'm always glad to help," his friend replied, waving Lloyd out the door. "No matter how bad the world gets, if Lloyd still looks up to me..."

"Magnificent, Shouma! Downing a monster like that with such ease! S-Rank adventurers blanched at the sight!"

Stop that.

"You're the best, Shouma! You know all this ancient magic! You must join the sorcerer's guild. You have the makings of a great sage!"

Don't. What does that even mean?

"Good work, Shouma. Take my daughter's hand, and my title is yours."

Why would you say that? I just drove off a few bandits! This is so dumb!

"No way you could clear an S-Rank quest without cheating—that's Shouma for you!"

Quit doing that! Nobody's cheating!

"You're so strong!" "The most OP!" "The greatest sage ever!"

"———Just go to hell!?!"

Shouma had drifted off in his seat after Lloyd left. His dreams had awakened him.

"Ugh, gross nightmares. Don't take me back there..."

He swore again, glaring through the window.

The sun was down, and the streets were lit by magic stones.

"So many tiresome things clogging up the corners of my mind."

The ice in his coffee had melted. Feeling like that ice, he sighed.

"If I'd had more than curiosity and enthusiasm, maybe I'd have been less disappointed. If I look for a goal like Lloyd is—no."

He caught himself glowering in the windowpane, as if his reflection was scolding him for the indulgent thought.

“That’ll just get me swarmed by more shitty people. People who don’t think for themselves, who just try and butter you up and profit from it.”

Watching insects flit about the lamps, he ground his teeth loudly enough for the people seated at the next table to hear.

“Um, sir...we’re closing soon.”

“.....”

“If you’d like to place one last order—*eep!*”

The reflection of the customer’s face in the window. His sullen expression. His eyes lit with fury and anger. The server gasped and backed away.

Her shriek brought Shouma back to his senses. He reapplied his smile.

“Oh, sorry! Last orders? No thanks! I’m on my way out, so just bring the check.”

Even his smile seemed unnerving now. The server hastily brought the bill.

Seeing her so fearful made Shouma mad at himself—but not for scaring her.

“I did it again! I can’t let it show. Once someone’s got their guard up, it’s hard to deceive them.”

Frankly, he just didn’t care about anyone but Lloyd.

As he left the café, he muttered, “Just remembering that stuff does *this* to me. I can’t let that happen to Lloyd. Gotta keep him oblivious...”

The cold air was cooling his head, so he took his time walking.

Chapter 3

A Harrowing Past: Like Lloyd Belladonna, but Not Oblivious

Shouma and Lloyd were close in age, and both lived with Grandpa Pyrid.

Personality-wise, they couldn't have been more different. Shouma was outgoing and full of energy, while Lloyd was shy and withdrawn—and being “weak” didn't help.

Perhaps that's why they got along so well. Sometimes opposites attract.

Shouma had the decisiveness to pull Lloyd along and keep him safe, the ideal big brother.

Shouma was curious about everything—and eventually, he got curious about the world outside the village.

Pyrid had taught him how to fight, and he was sure of his strength. Pyrid and Alka were against the idea, but he left anyway.

Very much like how Lloyd might have been if he *knew* how strong he was.

If this were a classic adventure tale, Shouma would have run into people and monsters so powerful, they'd have shattered his confidence, and he'd have learned just how little he really knew.

Instead, he'd confronted a harsh reality.

His home was the exception. The people outside it were so much weaker, he could hardly believe it.

Shouma was not afforded the luxury of Lloyd's cluelessness.

He soon realized how this affected the people he met.

Still, he still longed for earth-shattering adventures and triumphant successes.

And yet.

He helped someone out and was instantly an adventurer, praised by those in

charge.

He fought one thing, and everyone told him he was the strongest man around.

He showed off a bit of magic and was touted as the greatest mage in history.

He had yet to even *try*. It felt completely ridiculous.

He was shattered not by vicious monsters—but by futility.

He felt like an adult who'd wandered into a children's playroom.

Shouma realized he could destroy the world if he wanted.

His hopes and dreams dissipated. It was like waiting years for a game to come out and discovering it was so easy, you could beat it one-handed. It was short. With a dull script. Filled with stressful subsystems. The disappointment was immeasurable, and Shouma fled back home less than six months later.

That's where his grudge against the chief began. She'd known this would happen and had tried to stop him—but never told him why.

He spent days as a hollow shell.

Lloyd's innocence proved his salvation.

The boy read the novels Shouma had brought back and started babbling about leaving the village and becoming a soldier. That made Shouma feel like those six months had not been in vain.

The weakest kid in town trying not to be. His light, his angel, his Lloyd—and he swore not to let the boy follow the same path he had.

Shouma had found a new goal. A reckless, grandiose ambition—to make the world strong enough for Lloyd.

When his own dream had crumbled, he'd lost all motivation—but this new goal revived his passion. He reveled in it.

To ensure that Lloyd remained unaware of his own strength, he constantly told him how amazing the world outside was and made sure he was thoroughly convinced.

The boy believed every word, and though Shouma felt a pang of guilt, he was

convinced it was a fate preferable to his own. He lied like he had two tongues and then left the village once more.

He'd assumed himself to be in a race against time...but Lloyd *still* hadn't worked out the truth. Shouma was waffling between, "Maybe I hyped it up too much?" and "Actually, that's really impressive when you think about it. Lloyd does not disappoint."

But this goal put the light back in Shouma's eyes. For Lloyd's sake, he would turn against the world at large.

Like today, sometimes he remembered the pain of his past. Each time, though, he thought of Lloyd's smile and banished the painful memories.

Outside Azami, out of human sight, he muttered, "Time to run."

Once he was off the road, bounding from tree to tree and mountain to mountain, like in some super parkour run, he was at the border in no time.

But before he stepped into Jiou, he saw an inspection taking place and swung by to check it out. Hiding atop a tree, he peered through a telescope, watching closely.

He'd assumed they were spot-checking suspicious travelers, strengthening protections against smuggling—but this was clearly different.

"What the—?" Shouma muttered. "This is less of a customs check than a quarantine. Wait, weren't there soldiers talking about a curse?"

He moved his scope around and found a merchant whose skin bore the distinctive thorn-like pattern on their skin and who appeared very irate.

"Come to think of it, I remember old man Sou saying something about a demon lord named Dionysos," Shouma muttered. "I thought we weren't using it anytime soon... Did someone slip up? Not like them."

He sighed.

"That was supposed to help start the war and wear Alka out. One false move, and this thing might actually take Lloyd down! What's going on here, Sou?"

Concerned, Shouma left the scene.

Sou, the man Shouma spoke of, was visiting the manor of a local lord.

The area was shrouded in darkness, and the room itself was lit only by candles.

Sou stood bathed in that flickering glow.

At a glance, he appeared to be an older man, but his back was so straight that he gave the impression of a younger man in disguise.

It was hard to tell if he was smiling or angry. Hard to guess if you should speak seriously or in soft tones. Like a notoriously hard-to-please boss.

Behind him was the owner of this manor, a local lord named Tramadol.

He was perched on the edge of a luxurious couch, leaning forward, looking penitent.

Anyone watching him shake and quiver as he muttered to himself would never imagine him to be the master of the house.

Sou said nothing.

Unable to bear the silence, Tramadol gathered his remaining nerves and spoke, his voice a desperate croak.

“It must be enough. I’ve worked myself to the bone...!”

“It is nowhere close,” Sou intoned.

Tramadol flinched, turning his sunken eyes toward the man.

“What more do you want from me? I’ve done what you asked! Spread this mystery stuff all over! This isn’t what local lords do! You’ve reduced me to a common criminal!”

He began gnawing his nails.

“Troubled by a guilty conscience, are you? With all the wealth you’ve stolen, you hesitate to get your own hands dirty?”

Sou’s eyes glanced around the room’s fineries, less in appreciation than condemnation.

“Enough! You gave your word you’d restore me to the top of the local lords!”

“And you believed that? You had access to the Azami market. That is the sole reason we’re making use of you. If you do not work for us now, when will you? If we choose to grant your wish, it will be *after* you distribute this.”

Sou stepped closer, dangling a bottle filled with a sinister-looking liquid before the lord’s eyes.

Tramadol clutched his arm.

“But what *is* it?! I had a servant take a dose, and he flew into a rage, upsetting everyone in sight! Spewed insults at me like the consequences no longer mattered!”

“Those were his *true* feelings. When humans grow emotional, they let the truth slip out, whether driven by impulse, anger, or sadness.”

Sou shook off Tramadol’s grasp, toying with the bottle in the candlelight.

“Oh, but it makes them easier to manipulate. An emotional mob. With a clear enemy in Jiou. No matter who tries to suppress it, the war will be unavoidable, no matter what Alka does.”

He slipped the bottle back in his pocket, his smirk most malicious.

“It causes no physical harm. There is a thorn-like pattern on the skin—which *is* a shame. But Azami knows their stuff. They’ll soon realize a *curse* has been placed upon them.”

That word made the color drain from Tramadol’s face. Not that he’d had much to begin with.

“A curse?! I knew this was dangerous! I don’t want to die!”

“You won’t! You have nothing to fear from it. Make sure it’s everywhere. And then we will back your bid to take control of the local lords. Giving you not just money—but a healthy body, too.”

“Good, good,” Tramadol whispered, biting his nails. Perhaps Sou’s curse was already on him.

Sou gave him a satisfied nod and stepped out onto the balcony, staring up at the night sky.



“Spread the thorn curse. Once it’s everywhere, Alka will no longer be capable of stopping me.”

His eyes narrowed.

“Lloyd...you have magic far beyond that of a human. I am a runeman, and as long as you admire the novel based on my deeds, *The Heroic Sergeant Sou*, then not only will I never fade away, I will grow steadily more tangible. I do regret this, but it is necessary.”

Like a blown-out candle, he vanished into the night.

It was morning, and Lloyd was ready for the second day of internships.

The first had ended in frustration, but he was even more fired up now.

“Okay! I can do this!”

“Mmm?” Marie gave him a bleary look over the food he’d made her. “Lloyd, you seem really excited about something.”

“Oh? Was it obvious?”

“Yeah, I mean...I see you every morning. And the breakfast was fancier than usual.”

“I guess it was.”

Lloyd’s mood was often reflected in his cooking.

Marie figured it couldn’t hurt to tease him.

“So what’s in the cards, Lloyd? Got a hot date?”

Lloyd looked her right in the eye. “Yes,” he said.

She had expected him to panic and deny it, but now she was the one panicking.

“Whaaaat? You do?! Seriously, with who?”

But he just grinned. “I’m kidding,” he said, sticking out his tongue.

“Cough...cough... Y-you are?”

“Totally.”

Marie managed to catch her breath.

Realizing he'd turned the tables, she grinned, admitting defeat.

"Lloyd, you shouldn't play me like that. It's bad for the heart! Oof..."

She was a fragile thing.

"I've learned. Once you get that look on your face, you're definitely planning to tease me."

"Aww, that's no fun."

Marie looked him over.

When he'd first arrived here, he was still fresh-faced. Now, though, he was starting to look grown-up—to her eyes, at least.

"Lloyd, have you gotten taller?"

"Um, I haven't measured in a while. I drink milk every day, so I hope so? It's supposed to build strong bodies."

"It does! And...well, maybe the confidence is helping. You've stopped insisting you're weak all the time."

He still worried about it sometimes, but she'd noticed he'd been much more positive these days.

"Eh-heh-heh...maybe I have. Uh, I'd better get going."

He shot her a bashful smile, then waved himself out the door.

Marie watched him go, pleased by his growth but partly missing the old Lloyd.

"I can't let him leave me behind."

With that in mind, she decided to try her hand at her greatest weakness—housework. A simple task—washing the cup from which she'd been drinking.

"Eep! The water's so cold! Argh, I hate this time of year. Hot water...makes your skin dry, though. Maybe I should just leave it to soak and let Lloyd do it later... Oh, he's already cleaned everything else... Well, maybe I'll try again some other day."

It seemed like Marie's growth was still a long way off.

Lloyd arrived at school. After a brief homeroom, his internship group gathered.

Micono was looking much more stressed today.

“Good morning, everyone! Mmm? What’s wrong, Micono?”

“M-morning, Lloyd Belladonna! Absolutely nothing!”

But the look on her face clearly said otherwise.

“See, Lloyd,” Riho said, “Our destination today is her main goal.”

“Ohhh...”

She’d been pretty worried about getting posted somewhere bad the day before, too.

Those had been her safety options...but today was where she truly wanted to be.

The stress was casting a pall over her usual strengths.

“.....Not like her to get cold feet,” Phyllo muttered.

“But she never has been good at taking a hit,” Selen pointed out.

Lloyd noticed they were missing someone. “Mmm? Where’s Allan?”

“.....Oh.” Phyllo pulled a letter out of her pocket. “.....Renge gave me this.”

In beautiful handwriting, it read, *Don’t look for me—Allan.*

“Renge totally wrote that.”

“I don’t even wanna know...”

They’d all seen him dragged away and were confident he was no longer in one piece.

“So, staying out of their couple problems. Micono, let’s make this internship a good one.”

Micono was far too preoccupied with her own stressors to care what happened to Allan.

“I’ll be fine. I did amazing at the festival. My effort will be noticed...”

“Is that actually relevant?”

“Oh, absolutely. You remember the three big shots sitting in? One was the top diplomat. Up there with the royal guards is the most desirable posting. Pays way better, way harder to get in.”

Riho was clearly into the idea of earning more. It sounded like she’d done her homework on all the profitable positions.

“And the diplomats are second only to the royal guards in proximity to the throne. They direct border or naval security exercises, handle international relationships and the king’s schedule, arrange for travel abroad and invites to visit Azami—they cover a broad range of duties, all of which are pretty vital, which is *why* the pay is so good...and the clout that comes with all that. It’s where the best of the best assemble. They then narrow those numbers down with the grind of the job itself. Definitely one of the more politically significant positions.”

“That sounds impressive. You know so much about it, Riho! Are you aiming for it yourself?”

“Lord no,” Riho snorted. “Sure, the pay is good, but they work you to the bone. Nothing is worth that. Unless what you want is the *honor*.”

“Like bringing honor to your hometown? That does sound nice.”

Lloyd pictured himself going back to Kunlun in his diplomat uniform and smiled. But he soon shook off the temptation.

“But I don’t think my goal is about becoming *well-known*. I don’t think that sounds like something I could or would want to do.”

This was probably the right choice, though perhaps also a little hardheaded.

“Lloyd Belladonna, you are right to be intimidated,” Micona declared. “No diplomatic duties can be handled by someone who merely thinks it ‘sounds nice.’ One false move, and international relations may be strained for years to come. Could you handle that?”

Everything she was saying was accurate, however... She’d chased the leader of the Ascorbic Domain around with treant roots and made quite a mess of

things in Rokujou, too.

But Micona was always good at ignoring her own failings.

“I don’t want to ruin anything,” Lloyd said firmly.

“No one blinded by fame or fortune could hope to succeed here. Could you, Lloyd Belladonna?”

She made that sound like a threat.

“You’re so uptight,” Selen said. “Why do *you* want to work there?”

“Isn’t it obvious? If I land a position there, Marie will be very impressed!”

Not exactly a noble ambition.

“.....That’s worse than fame or fortune.”

Riho pulled Selen and Phyllo close.

“Sounds like she doesn’t know Marie’s the princess,” she whispered. “If she went for the royal guards and Marie went back to the palace, they’d see each other all the time.”

“Given how Marie usually behaves, no one would ever suspect that.”

“.....Master and Allan haven’t worked it out, either.”

All her speechmaking seemed to have helped Micona get her groove back, and she held fast to Lloyd’s eye, essentially declaring war.

“Lloyd Belladonna! If you intend to steal my seat, know that I shall not yield lightly.”

Lloyd met her intensity head-on.

“I don’t know what I can do here, but I aim to give it everything I’ve got! If I decide I’ll fail before I even try, I’ll never accomplish anything.”

“Oh...?” Micona said, eyes widening. “You’ve gained some mettle, I see. Is this helping?”

She reached out and flicked his armband—the one worn by the head of the first-years.

“Maybe,” Lloyd said, grinning. “But I think you and my friends have helped

straighten me out.”

“Hmph. You don’t know what you can do, so you plan to give it everything you’ve got. Good words. They’ve helped me relax, I admit. I thank you for that, Lloyd Belladonna.”

“! You’re welcome.”

Things sure had wrapped up nicely.

They then proceeded to the diplomatic workplace in style.

But the closer they got, the less confident they became.

Micona’s face was once more shrouded in gloom, her stress rebounding with a vengeance. Was this the right place? Could she really do it? She was poring over the information, double-checking everything.

The location specified—was a bit *too* fancy. It was comparable to a nobleman’s manor. If someone had told them this was where they were holding the ball, they’d have believed it.

“My first time here, but...are we sure it’s not a hotel?”

“.....Are we here to dance?”

“I’ve only seen it in movies, but it does look rather...regal.”

A range of takes, but Riho had done her homework—again, there was money involved—and was there to explain.

“Don’t freak out on me, people. Sure, it’s imposing. But it doubles as a reception space for foreign dignitaries.”

“It does?”

“Yep. Any visiting VIPs stay here, negotiating or getting wined and dined. There are other similar buildings on the West and North Sides that have different styles to ’em, but this is the biggest. It’s got a banquet hall, conference rooms, a library, a ballroom—the works.”

“.....I think you’re making it worse.”

“So any work we don’t want our allies knowing about happens elsewhere. I bet the plan is to show the cadets this place and put the fear of god in ’em.

After all, this isn't a post you seek without good reason. Right, Micona?"

Micona flinched at hearing her name but quickly recovered.

"I-I've got a good reason! I'll do *anything* for Marie!"

A statement that contained plenty of problems.

Riho point-blank ignored it.

"Obviously, their budget is bonkers. I mean—that is a *legit* ballroom."

".....I'm not much for dancing. Unless I have a sword in my hand..."

Lloyd was doing his best not to be intimidated.

"Entertaining visitors... Well, I learned a lot at the hotel. Perhaps I can put those skills to use here! Smiles go a long way."

He smiled, trying to hide his nerves. It was a bit forced, but that kind of worked in his favor.

"Hmph. Right there with you, Lloyd Belladonna."

Micona put on her best smile. Her cheek muscles moved, but her eyes weren't laughing at all, making her look like a shark.

"Come on, people!"

Shark Micona led them in, causing a ripple of panic among the guards at the gate.

Once inside, they made their way to the designated location.

"This is it."

The sign read DIRECTOR GENERAL'S OFFICE. The door itself wasn't gaudily decorated but was no less imposing for it. The paneling formed a complex pattern, clearly showing the money put into it. No excessive ornamentation but care taken not to look cheap. A door that symbolized the needs of any diplomat.

Micona's hand shook slightly, but she clenched it tightly and knocked.

"Oh, come in," a cheery voice called.

Micona gingerly opened the door and found the top diplomat standing to greet them. He, too, had been at the Military Festival, smoothly shirking

responsibility at every turn.

Clearly a man to be reckoned with. He had that “friendly, but you can’t let your guard down” aura. Everyone braced themselves.

His smile never wavered.

“Director General of the Diplomatic Bureau sounds fancier than it is. No need to sweat it, I assure you. Oh!”

Taking that as a sign of recognition, Micona broadened her sharklike grin in relief. “Yes, I helped resolve the festival incident. Micona Zol, head of the second—”

“If it isn’t Lloyd! How’ve you been? Remember me?”

Much like the welcomes from the PR director and the security chief, Lloyd’s reception was a bit *too* warm. He looked uncomfortable—still unaware of the true grandeur of his feats.

Seeing Lloyd once again steal her thunder, shark-faced Micona no longer looked happy. She’d donned the face of an ogre.

“Hnggggg...!”

“.....Micona.....watch the face...”

Meanwhile, Lloyd’s festival performance was earning him another shower of praise.

“Ha-ha-ha. That said, we do have work to do. Please sit.”

Their host directed them to the couch and took a seat himself, briefing them on the goals for the day.

“Normally, we’d just have you do a bit of basic office work and call it a day. Which is not to say we’re taking it easy on you!” He chuckled.

“Office work is important!” Micona said, doing her best to earn those points.

“That’s half the reason. Anyone know the other?”

He sounded so much like a teacher that Riho actually raised her hand.

“If you have us help entertain visitors and we mess up, it could be a huge

problem.”

“Exactly! Lloyd has smart friends, I see.”

He applauded and then elaborated.

“That and a blunder I made once in my youth. Generally, we’ve had interns do some paperwork, and then I tell them that story. Basically a warning. Helps ensure applicants have what it takes.”

“A threat? Should you really be telling us, then?”

“Absolutely,” he said, nodding happily. “My mistake strained relations for years. But for your group—I think we’ll have you watch something a little more practical.”

“With visiting dignitaries?”

“Exactly.”

Riho squinted, certain there was more to this.

“You’re sure? Or do you stand to gain more than you risk?”

“Clever! Actually, you know the man, Lloyd. Having you around would help smooth things over, and it’ll be an educational opportunity.”

“Who is it?”

“King Sardin of Rokujou.”

“.....You’re kidding,” Phyllo groaned, looking like she’d bitten into something sour.

The dignitary was her father.

They left the office and were ushered down the hall into another wing. Several stern-looking security guards stood on the luxurious carpet. Beyond them—the honored guest.

“This is the reception room. Heavy security, the utmost attention paid to the guards’ equipment so they can handle any situation immediately. We hire professional cleaners and recheck all diplomats for any dubious items...all to prevent problems before they happen.”

He spoke proudly, certain they'd left no stone unturned.

But a moment later, there was a scream from the room.

"Aughhhhhhh!"

The diplomat's proud smile vanished. Even he couldn't maintain it now.

"?! What happened? It's locked... Someone fetch a key!"

He sounded desperate.

But Phyllo heard what sounded like her father's scream...

"Nooooo!"

...and kicked the door in. (It looked every bit as expensive as the carpet.)
Shards flew everywhere.

".....Going in!"

She led the charge, scanning the room to see what had happened.

"Aughhh! Darling wife, I swear it's not true!"

"What isn't true?! Spit it out!"

"Stop pulling on my joint first!"

Before their very eyes, Sardin Valyl-Tyrosine was being tortured by his wife and bodyguard, Ubi Quinone. Clearly, he'd once again bungled something.

"....."

Phyllo gave her father a contemptuous look. Any father of a teenager would immediately feel sympathetic.

"I heard them talking outside! Anytime I turn my back, you start flirting with the servants! Go on, lay your excuse on me!"

"I was just, um! Keeping up the dumb dandy act! You know I only have eyes for you!"

"Suuuure. Looks to me like you're *enjoying* it."

Clearly, not all was well in this marriage, either.

".....What are you *doing*?"

Their daughter's snarl finally made them aware of their surroundings.

"Phyllo...", Ubi said, surprised.

Sardin seemed to think she was here to help him and started crawling toward her. "Darling daughter! How I've missed youuuu! Heeelp! Gah!"

When he scrabbled at her foot, Phyllo stomped on his face. Dads of the world, no matter how much you love your daughters, do not clutch their feet. Unless you like getting stomped at the cost of all dignity.

Sardin seemed mildly pleased by the exchange, his smile never wavering, so perhaps he was one of *those*.

"So nothing important."

"It seems pretty dire, Riho Flavin."

Micono looked as furious as Riho did relieved. She was desperate to work here and saw the destruction of the door as a clear blow against her, whatever the situation.

"Phyllo Quinone! Emergencies are not an excuse for wanton destruction! We had time to assess the situation properly!"

".....Um, right."

"It's always like this with you. I dunno what you learned in the Ascorbic Domain, but you knock a tree down every time you practice those moves! Those trees are public property! You're smearing mud on the reputation of all cadets. And now you're trampling the king of Roku— Why are you doing thaaaat?!"

Realizing the mud-smearing had spread to royalty, Micono tried to pull Phyllo away.

".....Clearly, the fate all perverts deserve."

"This pervert's the king! Turn a blind eye to his perversion!"

She was pretty much delivering the final blow, as usual accidentally letting things slip when at her wit's end.

Sardin seemed thoroughly pleased with all the attention his daughter was

giving him, but at this point, he got up and grinned meatily.

“Flawless timing, my dear. Proof you’re hale and hearty! Oh?” He blinked, spotting Phyllo’s friends. “Lloyd! Girls! It’s been far too long. It’s your boy, Sardin!”

“You’ve got footprints on your face, dear,” Ubi hissed. “But nice to see you all again. There was so much turmoil last time, we barely got to speak.”

The mood was rapidly shifting to “warm reunion.”

The diplomat was struggling to catch up.

“I’m glad it was just a family squabble, but...”

His head swiveled toward Phyllo.

“.....Mmm?”

Her default was deadpan.

“Um, are you...by chance...King Sardin’s daughter?”

“.....Um...” She clammed up.

“You’re a Rokujou princess?!” He yelped, taking that as a “yes.”

“.....Tch, dang it.”

If exposed, things could become more difficult, so Mena didn’t want anyone to know, and Phyllo had kept it a secret. However, thanks to Sardin’s blunder, the cat was out of the bag.

“Er, no, that’s not true at all, Director General! Phyllo and I are...yes! Stompee and stompette! Gah! Darling wife, why?!”

“No worming out of it now, and you suck at lying anyway. Sir, you’re spot-on. She’s our girl.”

“.....Mmm,” Phyllo admitted. “Yes.....technically a princess. Don’t want to call myself *his* daughter, but...”

“Well, if everyone knows, then yes! Phyllo’s my beloved daughter, and my ribs hurt.”

“.....Don’t hug me, dumb dandy. And it’s your fault he knows. Repent.”

“I’m sorry for everything! So stop hitting my cracked rib!”

That was enough to convince the diplomat. “They really are family...”

Blinking, he bowed his head to her.

“Wh-why is a princess...? No, the fault is mine. I apologize for my prior rudeness.”

In his position, a foreign princess attending school in his country was the kind of fact he couldn’t just *not* know. It was like carrying a bomb around that could destroy their alliance for generations.

He felt like he’d been walking along with his eyes closed only to look back to discover he’d just crossed a minefield.

He bowed low and stayed that way, resisting the urge to demand to know which dime-store novelist had come up with *this* plot twist.

Their boss’s reaction reminded Riho and Selen just who their friend really was.

“Oh, yeah, she *is* technically royalty.”

“I had completely forgotten. Given her typical behavior...”

“.....Mmm.”

Phyllo looked weirdly proud of that, and Ubi appeared relieved to see this.

“Good, Phyllo. You’re enjoying school, I see.”

Meanwhile, some of her friends had been *totally clueless*.

“Huh? A princess? Seriously?” Micona was gobsmacked.

“Sh-she is?!” Lloyd gasped.

They looked at each other and then at Phyllo, who seemed unsure what to do.

Riho poked Lloyd’s cheek.

“Yo, Micona is one thing, but Lloyd, you were *there*. You remember, after the mess with the movie? You saw them all together!”

“Er, um...I remember wondering why they were doing family improv exercises

even though the movie was done filming. I just thought it was part of the Rokujou film set culture!”

No matter how much a country loves movies, they wouldn’t do this *all* the time.

Despite how forced his theory had been, it just seemed to impress the royal couple.

“Ha-ha-ha! I don’t think we need to worry about you, Lloyd, but just because Phyllo’s a princess, don’t you dare treat her different.”

“Oh, no! Rokujou royalty or not, she’s still Phyllo.”

Lloyd treated everyone the same, no matter how high-born they might have been. In a good way.

Meanwhile, Micono...

“Phyllo Quinone...you’re a Rokujou princess...”

“.....Uh, yes?”

...was definitely the type to let it bother her. Her head was spinning as she wondered whether or not she should apologize. In the end, she settled on “being angrier.”

“A princess should know how to carry herself!”

“.....Um?” Even Phyllo’s eyes went wide at that one.

“Your property destruction damages not just the cadets’ reputation but that of Rokujou! If you don’t want your parents worrying, learn to live like a normal student!”

“.....Mmm.”

“And you may be a princess, but I’m still your senior. Don’t you forget it!”

“.....Okay.”

Micono, in her own way, did look after the underclassmen.

“So why are you all here?” Sardin asked. “I mean, I’m pleased to see you, but...”

“Oh, they’re actually here for a trial work experience,” the diplomat began, describing the internship system and how he had enough faith in Lloyd to bring him along to their meeting.

“Aha!” Sardin said, leaning forward. “So you’re interested in diplomacy, Lloyd? You’re easy to like and well-mannered! Much like yours tru—ow!”

“Don’t be dumb,” Ubi snapped, chopping that rib again. “If Lloyd was like you, he’d get yelled at all the time.”

She shot Lloyd a smile.

“As it is, I figured you could handle anything. I’d recommend him, too.”

Lloyd was turning red. “F-far too much praise,” he stammered. “And I’m still deciding...”

Everyone was so supportive, he’d probably have gotten hired on the spot if he’d accidentally nodded.

“Hngggg...” Wannabe diplomat Miconna was none too pleased.

“See, Miconna. You can’t compete. He’s *Sir Lloyd*.”

“How dare you, Selen Hemein! I did well in both Rokujou and the Domain!”

“Yeah, no,” Riho said. “What you did is probably best forgotten, Miconna. You went berserk.”

She may have meant that to be nicer than it sounded, but Miconna *had* burst into Lloyd’s audition, treant roots going wild, and chased Anzu around Azami with her tentacles out, so... It took a calm mind and a strong will to control and keep those roots where they belonged.

“I certainly didn’t expect to cause such an uproar. However, as the head of Azami’s diplomacy division, there is one thing I must discuss with you, Your Majesty.”

“My husband frequently disgraces himself, so pay it no mind.”

“I don’t know about frequently, darling! I’m usually rather dashing!”

“Hard to look dashing with a footprint on your face. Phyllo?”

“.....Mmm.”

His daughter wiped his face for him, and Sardin finally switched to serious mode.

“Thank you, Phyllo. Now then, you wish to discuss...Jiou, I assume? And if it’s through you and not the king, you’re trying not to make a big deal of it. So a feeler for an early-stage proposal, or a precaution, a matter of which we should be aware?”

“Sharp as always, Your Majesty.”

Sardin leaned forward, interested, and the diplomat handed out a few files.

“Take a look at these.”

Sardin and Ubi did just that. Lloyd’s group got a single file and passed it around.

“A curse, is it? Azami certainly never lacks for trouble.”

“I am aware. It’s been one thing after another. So far, this has only resulted in fights...”

“But this is bothering you?” Sardin asked, tapping a certain sentence. “The thorn-like pattern on their skin, seemingly symbolic. That does suggest a curse.”

“Given your kingdom’s magical expertise, those words carry weight. Anyone with these symptoms seems to have...heightened emotions. They don’t disguise how they really feel. And...that makes them volatile.”

“Excellent,” Ubi said, folding her arms. “Emotional instability makes them difficult to predict and hard to handle. And laymen don’t know how to pull their punches.”

“Azami’s medical rescue and magical countermeasure divisions are working together to discover the cause.”

“But I’ve had no reports of anything like this in Rokujou. It may well be targeting Azami specifically. The sooner you can grasp the nature of the curse, the better—any luck so far?”

The diplomat shook his head. “At the very least, there are no indications of magic circles or strange sigils going around.”

Listening to them talk, Riho and Selen put their own minds to work.

“Mmm, then a magic stone or other conduit? Something that can be passed out like a drug.”

“The local lords have control of distribution routes, so odds are high one of them is involved.”

“Indeed,” the diplomat said, sounding impressed. “Such bright young minds! We’ve just ordered all border security teams to ramp up their inspection protocols.”

“Then what we should do is put Rokujou on alert and consult the magic bureau about any spells with known similarities and potential countermeasures.”

With that conclusion reached, the diplomat bowed once more.

“Thank you for your time. That’s all from me. That said, I’ve yet to be informed of the reason for your visit. Might I inquire? And, of course, offer any assistance our office can provide.”

But this proposal reverted Sardin to his dumb dandy routine.

“I thought it was obvious! I’m here to see my kids! Ow!”

Giving his cheek a firm pinch, Ubi clarified. “That and the reshoots for the Azami and Rokujou coproduction. It’s my fault it’s been sitting on the shelf, but we’d like to finish it.”

“Hat’s hight!”

The problems that arose during the film’s production had caused substantial delays, and the diplomat was well briefed on all of this and eager to assist.

“I’ll let the king know,” he said. “We can adjust his schedule as needed.”

“Thank you. I’d love to drop in on him soon.”

The diplomat bowed his head again. “King Sardin, Lady Ubi, I thank you once more for gracing us with your presence.”

“Not at all,” Ubi said. “I wanted to see my daughters anyway. Hang in there, Phyllo.”

“.....Mmm.” Phyllo managed a faint smile.

“Once our duties are over, can we manage a family dinner?” Sardin asked.
“Ask Mena to join us.”

“You know she’s gonna say she’d rather not if you’re there.”

“Alas! If we tell her we’ve got shochu? I’ve heard she’s a fan.”

He mimed tipping a tumbler, but Phyllo was unfamiliar with the term.

“.....Is shochu a kind of liquor?”

“It is,” Ubi said happily. “It’s made from rice, and Mena said we had to try it while we were in Azami. Supposedly, it uses only the best rice from the Ascorbic Domain. Personally, I still prefer wine. Azami has some good reds!”

Apparently, they’d gotten their drink on last night, too.

“Come evening, my beloved Ubi opened and emptied all the expensive wine bottles. I didn’t get a drop! I found her asleep with her arms around a candelabra. Oof!”

“Don’t tell her *that*,” Ubi complained, blushing slightly and delivering another rib chop.

Perhaps she was a bit of a heavy drinker.

“.....I can’t imagine you drunk, Mom...”

This drew a grimace from everyone who’d been at Hotel Reiyokaku and had seen what happened when Phyllo mistook wine for “grape juice” and turned herself into the lord of destruction.

“So you really are a princess, Phyllo. I’m finally convinced.”

“.....Why?”

Phyllo herself had blissfully retained no memories of the incident in question.

Shouma was at Tramadol’s mansion—the source of the thorn curse.

He raced through the surrounding vineyards, through the immaculately maintained manor garden.

Along the way, he saw a gardener slacking off, muttering, “Why should I

bother?” and a servant venting their anger at the laundry... Actually, most people here seemed to be letting their emotions get the best of them.

“Tch, I knew it,” Shouma said. “Definitely that demon lord’s power.”

He increased his pace, searching for the manor’s owner.

“Who the—? Sneaking around where I can see ya, you’re clearly a thief! Drop dead before—gah!”

“Do be quiet.”

The guard at the gate was noticeably hotheaded and made the mistake of attempting to stop Shouma and got a full-on punch to the face for his trouble. The force of the blow dented the wall behind him.

That was enough to terrify the other guards.

“First, you’re all aggressive, now you’re frightened rabbits. Emotions sloshing all over the place. Dr. Eug gave me the rundown, but seeing it with my own eyes, it sure does feel like it could ignite a war.”

He raced up the stairs, into the fanciest room in the house.

“.....Sou.”

“Oh, Shouma. You ran all the way here?”

The older man showed not a hint of surprise.

They eyed each other menacingly, displaying not a trace of their usual shared affection for Lloyd.

“What the hell are you doing? We weren’t supposed to use Dionysos yet! That thing spreads like treants and has a crazy strong emotionally destabilizing hypnotic effect! It’s the ace up our sleeve to slow Alka down, riling up the masses with a curse even she can’t easily break!”

“You don’t say?”

A very phony response. Shouma’s frown deepened.

“Playing dumb on me? I went to Jiou, and not only have you not shown yourself, you swiped the Dionysos drug prototype. Dr. Eug was screaming, ‘That idiot!’ Tears in her eyes.”

“Not unusual. She’s always like that.”

“True, it’s basically her defining characteristic.”

Those tears are justified, Eug.

But her plight aside, Shouma wasn’t letting Sou distract him.

“So what’s going on? You’d better have a good reason here.”

Sou seemed prepared for this.

“Once a country is embroiled in war, they can’t just go, ‘Whoops, we take it back.’ Especially one as large as Azami. Living wood does not burn easily, but once the fires rage, they’re difficult to extinguish. At this stage, it matters little when we use a tool. With me so far?”

“Sou, it feels like you’re up to something. You were acting funny after the festival. What happened to the man who got so excited about Lloyd’s maid outfit?”

Men of two different generations getting “excited” about a boy cross-dressing was a more typical application of “acting funny,” but pay that no mind.

For Shouma, this was like encountering a classmate with whom you always make dirty jokes suddenly acting all prim and proper when girls are around.

“Let me flip the question, Shouma. What is your objection to deploying this early?”

“Lloyd’s trying to figure out his future. What Azami army position he should go for. Taking his dream dead serious. I don’t wanna mess that up.”

Shouma spoke passionately...and Sou’s response was a distant “Oh.”

“What’s up with you, Sou?!” Shouma yelled. “You’re usually, ‘What? Lloyd’s dream! You should have said! Cancel everything! Whoo-hoo!’ And you’ll blow off any plans we might have!”

“Shouma, I have never in my life said ‘Whoo-hoo.’ I may have thought it, but...”

Typical villains wouldn’t even *think* that interjection, really.

“.....You did?”

“.....Um, well. Point is, Lloyd’s accomplishments are on camera, and editing is going smoothly. Movies are spreading across the world, laying the foundation for the propaganda that will turn him into the hero of the modern age. Now we need only start the war itself and let him take action from there.”

“.....”

“You’re concerned about the casting? We’ve prepared all the enemies he could want. There’s one right here!”

Sou glanced over at a man wrapped in grape leaves. The torn remnants of finery were visible between the leaves.

“! That you, Tramadol?”

“He went on and on about reigning over the local lords, but I figured he’d be more useful as a rival for Lloyd. You can’t rule anything without a healthy body! Though he may have turned a tad *green*.”

Shouma shook his head. “Not enough.”

“Oh? I thought the visuals had real impact.”

“Not those. Strength! Even if we do something about Chief Alka, Lloyd’s got the Belt Princess Selen, Riho and her mithril arm, Phyllo and her training in the Pyrid-style, and uh...some others... Anyway, we need greater numbers!”

“Then just kill his friends first.”

“—————!”

That was sinister enough to shock even Shouma.

“It’s been on my mind for a while. Once the war starts, we need Lloyd to kill me—or all of this is futile. But for that to happen, he needs a reason. Being the ruler of the enemy nation will never do. It needs to be personal—the villain who killed his friends. He must be out for revenge. It’s high time we arranged that.”

“That’s—,” Shouma sputtered, ready to object.

“Am I wrong? I assumed you would be on board with it. You know how humans are. Riding your coattails, blinded by greed.”

“.....”

“You can’t tell me his friends are any different. Killing them will be for Lloyd’s own good! Before he learns how vile humans really are.”

“.....”

Shouma clearly wanted to say something but couldn’t find the words.

“I have my own tasks to handle. Kill Lloyd’s friends if you want, however you want.”

“.....”

“You know well how treacherous the delusion of friendship can be. I’m sure your blade will be swift.”

Shouma considered this a minute longer, then nodded.

“Yeah, right now, they might be good friends, but someday...for better or worse, people from outside Kunlun don’t see us as human. Before they break his heart—it’s better if they die while they’re still friendly and nice.”

“I can trust you with this?”

“Yeah...I’ve gotta protect my brother. Just...trust me to kill them when the time is right.”

Sou let that sink in and nodded. “Very well. I’ll handle everything else. For Lloyd’s sake and so that I may finally cease to be...leave no stone unturned.”

“.....Yeah.”



Shouma still seemed unsatisfied but tamped down his doubts. He left Tramadol's manor.

"I'm sorry, Shouma. To you and Lloyd," Sou whispered, alone in the moonlight.

His eyes were on the nurse uniform and the photos of Lloyd in it.

Internship, day three: morning.

The second day had brought unexpected reunions and revelations, and with a king's acknowledgment, Lloyd was thinking diplomacy might not be that bad.

Feeling like he had a clearer idea of what he could do for the Azami army, he was all fired up to try even harder and find what he really *wanted* to do.

That woke him up early—and to his surprise, Marie was up even earlier. A rare sight indeed.

"G-good morning, Marie," he gasped. "I-is something wrong?"

She was busy with a mortar and pestle, making something. "You look way too surprised," she said. "Morning to you, Lloyd. I *do* wake up early sometimes."

"Um...is it a special occasion? A morning sale on liquor? ...No! Is this actual *work*?"

"Lloyd, what do you take me for? I am still technically a witch!"

Even she added the "technically," but she shot him her best offended expression before showing him the medicine she was making.

Seeing her legitimately hard at work, Lloyd stammered his apologies.

"I—I see. Sorry. But if you're up early making medicine...is this a bad cold? The flu?"

Marie added what looked like kudzu roots to her mortar and started grinding them up.

"Not that, no. The carpenter won big at the races and bought some good wine, drank the whole bottle—and, well, turned out to be a bad drunk."

"Oh, one of those. Expensive booze can hit you the wrong way, huh?"

“He’s been yelling, ‘I feel sick!’ and his mood’s all over the place. I’m making something for the hangover and a stomachache. They’re both selling like crazy these days! Realized I was fresh out, so now I’m making them from scratch.”

Having heard of similar symptoms, Lloyd was frowning, lost in thought.

“Emotionally unstable... Marie, this might be the cur—whoops.”

He’d almost said “curse” but then remembered he wasn’t supposed to share that. He clapped his hands over his mouth.

“Don’t worry,” Marie said. “I’ve heard about this curse. Symptoms do align, but...we can’t be sure. We’ll see how he progresses before drawing any conclusions.”

“The head diplomat was talking to King Sardin about it yesterday.”

“The army may make an official announcement soon. Which might mean free medical examinations for it... I should let the carpenter know.”

Lloyd quickly prepared breakfast while Marie wriggled with anticipation.

“I made you some porridge. Make sure you get some rest once you finish that up! Doctors have to practice what they preach, remember? If the soup is cold, make sure you reheat it first.”

Seeing him worry about her, Marie smiled.

“You’re an angel,” she said, faking a western accent.

Totally dependent on him.

The idea of returning to the castle was not even mentioned. The king’s desperate efforts were almost certainly in vain.

At school, the interns assembled once more.

“Um, is Allan here?”

“I haven’t seen any sign of him.” Selen smirked.

“Oof.” Lloyd winced. “Renge must still be mad.”

“.....Mad enough to—mmph!”

Riho had hastily covered Phyllo’s mouth.

“That sounded potentially R-rated, and it’s waaay too early for that kind of talk, Phyllo.”

When Riho let go, Phyllo sulkily pursed her lips. “.....Raunchy talk is a perk of being a student. Once we graduate, it’s just an HR violation.”

“Not something a student about to go to her next internship should say.”

But while they were fooling around, Micona was off in her own world.

“Two days in a row, Lloyd Belladonna’s left me in the dust. If I let it show on my face, though, that’ll make a bad impression. I can do it! I’m up to the challenge! I can lead this battle against inappropriate favoritism! I’m the protagonist of this story, and it’ll take far more to get me down!”

An optimistic pain in the ass.

Having Lloyd’s popularity constantly shoved in her face had definitely pushed her over the edge. But Lloyd was *very* nice and didn’t realize this was his fault.

“Is something wrong, Micona? Are you feeling unwell?”

“Heh-heh-heh. You’ll regret those words today, Lloyd Belladonna!”

That was not the reaction he’d been expecting, and he let out a small yelp.

“Of course she isn’t fine. She’s Micona, and she’s always like this. Sir Lloyd, pay her no attention.”

“Well, if you say so. You get along with her best, Selen.”

All three girls were long since inured to Micona’s bullshit.

A rival bucking against the kindhearted leader, his band of colorful characters—the ideal JRPG party! As the story progresses, they would clash and grow closer— “Our battle is just beginning! Prepare yourself, Lloyd Belladonna!”

“Uh, okay? I’ll do my best, Micona!”

Yeah, these two aren’t going to have any touching late-in-the-game heart-to-hearts.

The vow she’d made on the first day seemed long since gone, and she was in full-on competitive mode as they set out.

“Where’s today’s internship, Riho?” Selen asked. She was disinclined to look this stuff up herself. One of those people who never lifts a finger if there’s someone around who’ll do things for her.

Riho was just that type, so she rolled her eyes and glanced at the documents. “You should try reading your own copy, Sele—gah!”

“.....Gah? What’s up?”

Everyone leaned in to see what had made Riho scream.

“Um, today’s the intelligence department? Didn’t they run the festival’s fortune-telling booth, profiling anyone who came in?”

Azami’s own espionage branch.

Tasked with information gathering, they were largely clandestine and did mainly undercover spy stuff.

“Also known as the plainclothes detectives, they investigate other countries or handle industrial audits domestically—quite a range of work. Most of it is shrouded in mystery. It does pay well—yet you’re not interested, Riho Flavin?”

Micono gave her a poke, and Riho realized she wasn’t getting off the hook.

“Rol works there.”

“.....She does?”

“Yep. After her stunt at the festival, she got promoted to head of intelligence. This could be rough.”

“But isn’t she like a sister to you?” Lloyd asked. “Maybe she’ll welcome us with open arms.”

“Ha-ha, she isn’t like Mena or your Shouma. She’ll just brush us off, looking crabby. That snake doesn’t open her arms to anybody.”

“Oh...but I feel like all three of them have a lot in common.”

As Lloyd murmured that, they arrived to find...

WELCOME! LLOYD BELLADONNA, PARTY OF FIVE.

...a huge sign, like one you’d find outside a hotel hosting an event.

“That looks like open arms, Riho.”

“For Lloyd.”

Not exactly clandestine. Micona had been frustrated enough by the preferential treatment as it was.

“Is there anywhere you don’t have wrapped around your finger, Lloyd Belladonna?!”

Even Lloyd was totally flabbergasted.

“.....Rol.....you’ve lost it...”

“What the hell is she thinking?”

Both Phyllo and Riho had history with Rol and were muttering darkly.

The bureau staff were bowing them in like attendants at a hot springs resort. They were all wearing yukata, like something you’d see Anzu wearing in the Ascorbic Domain.

“““Thank you for joining us today. Enjoy your stay.”””

“Hearing that from veteran soldiers does *not* make me want to ‘stay.’”

Lloyd spotted the lady from the fortune-telling booth. “Um, hello again. Could I trouble you for an explanation?”

“Lloyd! ‘Sup? You see, the boss lady said we had to dress like this, so we did! Well? Do I look good?”

“Very, but...where’d you even get them?” Selen asked.

The spy looked surprised. “A cadet made them for us. Second-year girl with glasses. You don’t know her?”

Everyone nodded. Micona rubbed her forehead. Glasses girl really got around.

“She’s sold herself to PR and intelligence... She’s better at this intern thing than I’ll ever be.”

Urged down the red carpet, they found Rol standing at the center of the room, arms folded—in a formal kimono. Like a hot springs madam.

“We’ve been waiting for you, Lloyd. Riho and Phyllo, too.”

“What are you after, Rol?” Riho scowled. “And what are you wearing? If you’re going to wear this kind of kimono, why not get down on your hands and knees, too?”

“Oh, this thing? I said it was a bit much, but that girl did her usual glasses thing and said, ‘You must *feel* the possibilities,’ and it was on me before I knew it. Once a kimono is on you, it’s quite difficult to take off.”

Micono bowed her head. “As head of her year, I must apologize.”

“Oh, don’t worry about it, Micono. We were the ones who asked.”

“Well, Madam Rol, when did you open a hot springs in the intelligence bureau?”

Riho was tugging at Rol’s sleeves, one eye on her expression.

Rol brushed her off and covered her lips.

“This outfit may not be the best example, but intelligence does involve a lot of disguises.”

“.....And a glib tongue.”

“Scoping people out while entertaining them is all part of the job. So be quiet and let us play host.”

Not the most hospitable attitude.

Riho’s eyes narrowed.

“You’re just trying to bait Lloyd into working for you.”

“Exactly. And not just because I know how good he is.”

“.....Oh? What else? Also, more please. Refill this.”

Phyllo handed Rol her cup, already in full-on “being served” mode.

Rol grimly poured her some tea, but she *did* seem to be in a good mood, because she whispered, “The king’s got his eyes on Lloyd. The internships were moved up because he was asking about Lloyd’s future goals.”

“.....That explains it.”

That cleared things up for Riho and Phyllo. Rol made them both swear not to

tell *him*.

“With eyes on him from above, any department he joins will get their whole budget approved. I don’t care if we’re his first or second choice, as long as we’re on his list. One word from him is a thousand in gold. Our future funding secured.”

“You always had a nose for those things.”

Phyllo gave them both a look.

“.....You’re definitely sisters.”

Rol returned a *you can say that again* grin and poured more tea into their cups.

“Long story short, working in intelligence requires you to know how to subtly manipulate your guest.”

“Tell me, Rol, have you looked up the word ‘subtle’ lately? Also, Lloyd ain’t your meal ticket—”

“You love donuts, right, Riho?” Rol asked, trying to silence her.

“Okay, we can call that subtle,” Riho said, easily bribed.

Rol looked very smug.

“Here in intelligence, we know what our targets like before we go in. It was our department that prepped the wine and shochu King Sardin likes.”

“Educational *and* filled with good food. This seems like a great place to work!” Selen exclaimed, already hooked.

“Argh, gotta let them entertain us to make a good impression, so why do I feel guilty? Wow, these hors d’oeuvres are delicious.”

Miconna had planned on being the one to do the buttering, so getting buttered up herself left her rather uncomfortable.

But not nearly as uncomfortable as Lloyd.

“Their serving techniques are certainly informative, but...”

“Relax, Lloyd.”

“But I came for an internship...”

Seeing him still hesitant, Rol used the card up her sleeve.

“That you did! I hear you’re a great cook. I bet you prefer feeding people over being fed, right? We already did our research on you, too. We know just what you like!”

“Oh?”

She paused dramatically...then pulled out a nurse uniform.

“Here you are, Lloyd! That’s what you wanted, right? Let’s make this a costume party! The second-year girl with the glasses said you were reluctant to put this on, but deep down—”

“Yes, I hated it more than anything.”

“Huh?”

“I. Hated. It.”

Unfortunately, glasses girl’s report had been wishful thinking.

Her trump card had come up short, and Rol failed to disguise her consternation.

“B-but...his hidden love of dress-up! The maid and butler outfits at the festival, the bellboy uniform at the hotel, the suit he rocked in Rokujou...”

All that information was accurate. The conclusion drawn was not.

“I apologize for my classmate,” Micono said.

Riho was grinning over her donut. “Now show us how you fix things when your fawning backfires.”

“.....Eyes peeled.”

“Hnggg...”

An awkward silence settled over the intelligence bureau, shattered by the dramatic entrance of a rather unintelligent man.

Bam!

“Wh-what the...?”

In fell Allan, eyes rolled back into his head.

“““Allan?!”””

But it was not the man himself, only the ax at his hip—or rather, Surtr, possessing it.

“Hark, young Lloyd! Finally found you! You’ve gotta help us!”

“Surtr? What’s wrong?”

The ax flew their way, and Lloyd was instantly joined by Selen’s cursed belt, Vritra.

“What’s wrong, Tony—I mean, Surtr? Is Allan still with us?”

Allan wasn’t even twitching. Surtr must have dragged him the entire way.

“H-he’ll live. For now...but...but not if...”

Before Surtr could get out another word, their pursuer arrived.

Swsh! Thnk! Swsh! Thnk!

Two small hatchets spun through the air and sank into the carpet.

“Those are—!”

“Renge’s secret art! Dragonfly!”

This martial arts technique allowed her to control her hatchets without using her hands. The Ascorbic Domain was known for these mystic moves.

Rol was so bamboozled that she trod on the hem of her kimono and fell flat on her face.

“Ka-bleaugh!”

“I”

The hatchets were on the move again, so Lloyd attempted to restrain them, like a fisherman controlling his catch.

“What is this? What *is* this?”

“Surtr! What’s gotten into Renge?”

“I mean,” Surtr said, glowing faintly. “She was always a bit unhinged where

Allan was concerned. But the other day she went totally off her rocker. Like, legit emotionally unstable.”

“““Emotionally unstable?!”””

The same thought crossed everyone’s mind...even as Renge herself appeared.

“Why, Allan?! Why wontcha understand...?!”

Full-on accent, no trace of elegance anywhere. Tears streaming down both cheeks.

“Mah heart aches for ya, and ya gimme nothin’! Lloyd’s nurse look really does it better for ya? Not like I don’t understand. It made me wanna snap pics for preservation, posterity, and private use.”

Those all sounded like it was mainly for personal use, and the fact that she didn’t plan to proselytize made it sound plenty persuasive.

“Oh no! She’s unstable! Incapable of rational judgment!”

“No, Sir Lloyd, Renge is entirely in her right mind.”

“Clearly not!”

Both Selen and Lloyd were equally certain of their assessment, and...well, both positions had their merits.

“Ya leave me no choice but to come atcha Ascobian style! A fight to the death! True warriors come to terms by putting their lives on the line!”

Hard to do that if one’s already dead. Also hard to fight when unconscious.

Renge had abandoned her axes and was now just biting Allan.

“This might be the curse.”

“Seeing it certainly is convincing,” Selen admitted. And if *she* was convinced...

But Renge was ready for action, a powder keg about to go off, no holds barred. So much was pent up in there, the future was assuredly R-rated.

As it looked like their internship might give way to internal bleeding, giving them an education in all the wrong things— “Secret art! Agricultural Backhoe!”

Merthophan burst in, loincloth and all, and a swift chop to the back of Renge’s

neck took her down. All jaws dropped, everyone wondering what about that move involved farmwork or why it required this attire.

Oblivious to the stares, the intruder adjusted his loincloth, looking extremely satisfied.

“Anyone have a rope? Too risky to leave her free like this.”

The shoulder of Rol’s kimono had come loose in the fall, but she didn’t even attempt to fix it. Instead, she ordered someone to fetch restraints.

They soon had Renge’s unconscious body tied up, and Merthophan let out a sigh of relief.

“I was inspecting the castle storerooms when I heard Allan had escaped her lecture and that Renge had been chasing him all night long. The situation sounded a lot like the symptoms of this curse, so I figured I should check it out. I stripped and headed out in search of Renge.”

Smoothly slipping the word “stripped” into innocuous exposition forced everyone to control their impulse to overreact. Merthophan never noticed.

“Hmm,” he grunted. “If this really is the fault of that curse, it’s worse than I thought. The wrong person affected could well become a deadly weapon. Good thing she was only focused on Allan.”

No one was tempted to react to *that* assertion. If he’d been awake, that would have given Allan extra cause to weep.

“Don’t worry, ex-Colonel Merthophan, not many people are as skilled as Renge.”

“Micona, don’t jinx us,” Riho hissed.

“And! If there are! I, Micona Zol, head of the Azami Military Academy second-years! Will handle things. The demon lord Abaddon gave me the jumping strength of locusts and the power of flight! The treant roots are highly flexible. I can stop anyone!”

Oh, she was just making a pitch. Leading with demon lord powers was a dubious choice, though.

“.....So obvious,” Phyllo muttered.

Without further ado, it was time to call in that jinx.

Tnk tnk tnk—slam!

Sliding headfirst into the room was...the king of Rokujou, Sardin Valyl-Tyrosine.

“Hey, everybody!” he said, sweeping his hair back. “It’s your—wait, we don’t have time for cheery greetings! Help!”

Lloyd ran up to him. “What’s wrong, Your Majesty?”

“Oh! Lloyd...and Phyllo! Salvation! Actually, I’m pretty lost myself.”

But even as Sardin reached for Lloyd, a knife landed inches from his face.

“Eep!”

“Er, what? A knife?!”

Lloyd turned his eyes toward the source. Finding...

“—————! !!”

...Sardin’s wife, Ubi. Normally very quiet—now screaming so loudly, it didn’t even form a sound.

“Ubi?!”

“.....Mom?”

She paid their shock no heed—as if her eyes were only on Sardin.

“ You and your dumb act! Are you actually *that* stupid?! You used to have your shit together! I get that it’s part of your public image now, but spare a thought for the people with you! Are you even...?!”

The stress of daily life had built up and was powering this Gatling gun of reasonable complaints—possibly more of a carpet bombing.

“She’s been like this all morning! I thought she was a bit off yesterday, but before I knew it, she’d turned into a total manic! Is this the thing?! The curse?!”

“Hi-yah!”

“Eeeek!”

Ubi had thrown another knife. Sardin was stuck to the floor like an insect, hereby dubbed *The Scared Man*.

“M-Micona! You said you could stop anyone! Now’s your chance!”

“Selen Hemein! How is this my chance? You want me to go up against a king’s wife? If I break her limbs, that won’t just be a diplomatic crisis—I’ll be headed straight to jail!”

“I didn’t ask you to *maim* her!”

“I—I don’t care who stops her, but try not to hurt my wife in the process!”

Sardin was still concerned for his bride’s safety, even in this predicament. Then—a rather carefree voice echoed through the room.

“Ugh, I thought I heard a huge racket.” In came Phyllo’s sister and Sardin’s daughter.

“.....Mena.”

“Gotta clean up my family’s mess here. Sorry, Mom. *Water Ball!*”

A quick chant, and Mena’s patented water magic covered Ubi’s head.

Encapsulated, she struggled for air for a few seconds before fainting.

“.....So what got into Mom? She was fine yesterday,” Phyllo said, cradling her.

Before Sardin could offer further details, Merthophan stepped in.

“Wait, Phyllo Quinone. These details should be shared with everyone involved. Rol, call Chrome and Choline, an expert on curses, and a doctor.”

He talked like the man in charge, despite the loincloth, so Rol soon nodded.

“Roger. Lay our guests on that couch, and I’ll send our agents out with the summons.”

First, the head of an Ascorbic clan, and now the bride of Rokujou royalty, both running amok— This was clearly no longer a mere “alert.”

“If this curse spreads, we’re in big trouble—imagine if everyone acts like this. If they hang those posters of me *after* it gets bad, everyone’ll be furious... I hope they don’t put them up at all.”

Lloyd's prospects might have seemed bleak, but he wet a cloth and was wiping down the faces of the unconscious duo, looking after them.

"If this took hold of someone with a *real* grudge, it could get exceedingly ugly." Selen frowned.

"That isn't the worst part. With a lot of mentally unstable folk gathered, it'll be a piece of cake to rile 'em up. Controlling a mob—that kind of brainwashing research is off-limits, even at the Rokujou Sorcery Academy."

Rol had been the headmaster there.

The mood grew dark, and the intelligence staff scrambled to set up an emergency briefing.

Not long after, Chrome and Choline arrived, shoulders heaving.

"These thorn curse incidents taking place on military grounds may be a blessing in disguise. If they'd been spotted in the Central District, there'd have been an uproar."

A royal consort and a clan leader waving around knives—the perfect targets for a media frenzy. Chrome shuddered at what the tabloids would have done with it.

"But the situation's still dire. King Sardin, can you fill us in on what happened to your wife this morning?" Choline asked.

"Early this morning, before the birds even began singing....," Sardin began, like he was telling a spooky story over the campfire, "...my wife had been drinking and struggled to rise. I washed my face and returned to find her still sitting on the edge of the bed, in a daze. I leaned in for a morning kiss, like always..."

".....Too much information."

"Yeah, hearing that from your dad is a big old nada."

Stories about parental flirting are the *real* horror stories.

"We have a right! We were apart for ten whole years!"

Sardin's protests were rather petulant. His daughters were looking more irritated by the second.

“Heh-heh-heh. Rare to see these two look so put off. Keep up the good work, King Sardin.”

“I agree. I wish I had a camera.”

Riho and Selen were both sneering.

“Ha-ha-ha! Natie, Phyllo, you’ve got good friends. But Ubi heartlessly brushed me off. Like always. A genuine Sardin shock.”

“.....There, there,” Phyllo said, relieved her mother was exactly the woman she’d always believed her to be.

“You never know until you try. No Sardin backs down from a challenge.”

“Renounce your ‘never give up’ ethos.”

He rejected this plea with a beaming smile. Clearly not renouncing anything today.

“Anyway, I figured that was it, but suddenly, she grew irate. She started with complaints about me going for a kiss in public or other minor gripes, and then, without warning, she had knives out and was swinging at me for real. A love too strong? No, this must be the curse. I knew that wherever Phyllo was, Lloyd would be there, too, so I, Sardin, ran to my safety! And here I am.”

“So Dad made an undignified dash with Mom’s unshakable pursuit right behind.”

“Hmm,” Chrome groaned. “The diplomat mentioned she’d been a bit irritable yesterday, so... This all started once you arrived in Azami, yes?”

“Mmm, she was never hostile like this before. I thought she was just tense from the state visit. That my approaches had finally broken through the ice in her heart and had brought out the soul of the would-be cuddler I’ve always imagined she could be.”

“.....Spare us your fantasies,” Phyllo groaned.

“From what I’ve been told, Renge’s behavior has grown increasingly erratic, too,” Merthophan said. “We assumed she was just giddy to be close to her beloved Allan...”

“If we look at what they have in common, we might be able to narrow down the source of the curse. Did they visit the same locations, eat the same things...?”

As Chrome trailed off, Marie entered.

“I got called in for medical advice. What a mess!”

“Oh, Marie!” Lloyd said, waving.

“Long time no see, Your Majesty,” remarked Marie.

“Once again, we meet under dire straits, ha-ha-ha.”

“A shame, yes. But for the thorn curse to hit two VIPs at once...”

“Welp, nothing Marie the Witch can’t handle!”

“Riho, don’t build me up here! We still don’t know the root cause, so all I can really do is treat the symptoms and see how it goes.”

Marie took a powder dissolved in starch, a type of excipient, and used a wooden spoon to pour some into each victim’s mouth.

“That should be good to start. Won’t—”

Fix them right away, so let’s see how it goes. Before she could finish the thought— Both sat up. As if nothing had happened. Looking fine.

“Um, what’s all this? Where’s Allan?”

“And...what’s got into you, dear? Explain.”

Seemingly completely cured. Everyone was stunned. No one more so than Marie herself.

“Too soon!”

“That’s amazing, Marie!” Lloyd exclaimed, looking very impressed. “You really are Azami’s savior!”

“Er, no, I didn’t...huh?”

That medicine wouldn’t even have entered their bloodstreams for the better part of an hour. Marie blinked several times.

“!Natie, Phyllo...”

Seeing Ubi trying to sit up, Lloyd stepped in. “Oh, Ubi, continue resting. I’ll change the towel... Oh, there’s still grime here. Let me wipe that.”

Lloyd used the damp towel—inscribed with a rune—to wipe Ubi’s face for her. Everyone’s got it now, right? Whenever Lloyd cleans things, he uses the *disenchant* rune like anyone else would use citric acid.

“““That’s why!”””

Everyone who knew this shouted at once.

Meanwhile, Lloyd was startled to find everyone pointing at him.

“Huh? Should I not be wiping the faces of royal families? Was this rude?”

Riho slapped him on the back.

“Nope, you did exactly the right thing, Lloyd.”

“It was definitely a curse of some kind, then. The diplomat suggested as much, but this solidifies it. And—”

“Jiou’s involvement is that much more likely.”

Sardin was still not over the *first* time his wife had been cursed, and the anger on his face showed no sign of his dumb dandy act.

“If it is a curse, that makes it easier to identify...and harder to deal with.”

“Black magic or hexes can be mixed with food...so many approaches.”

Without nailing down what the curse even was, it was hard to thwart. The situation had not improved in the slightest.

“Ubi, Renge, rest, please, but if you have any idea what might have triggered this behavior...”

“The trigger? No. I’m at a loss...”

“I wasn’t aware of anything... Did I have a fever?”

Renge and Ubi looked equally confused.

“Hmm, I did feel unwell. Like what I drank disagreed with me.”

“I grew frustrated with Allan’s behavior and added some wine to my tea. My elegant nightly drink.”

Whether spiking tea qualified as elegant was another matter, but they'd both gotten drunk.

"Did you drink, Your Majesty? How are you feeling?"

"I drank quite a bit myself, but only the shochu. It was quite a pleasant buzz. My beloved Ubi is more of a wine person, so she stuck to that."

Wine. They'd both said that.

"You know, we had someone on the East Side with these symptoms, and he'd coincidentally had a bottle of expensive wine, too."

"Could that be it?"

"Mmm. The producer or distributor...let's figure out *which* wine they were drinking."

"Lots of ways into the city, so it'll be tough to narrow down. If researched properly, though, we can find the source."

"The disruptive travelers were often of high status, making them extra difficult to handle, so it makes sense it would be a posh wine."

"And since they were drinking, it's easy to mistake for excess consumption or typical drunken behavior. Continue to check cases filed like that. We might find more."

"If there's individual variance in how the curse manifests, we could have asymptomatic patients. We've gotta get on top of this ASAP."

As they analyzed the situation, Chrome started handing out tasks.

"Rol and Choline, you're on trade routes. Merthophan, you go for production. Maria—I mean, Marie—you go with Lloyd and examine everyone who's been cursed."

"Me?" Lloyd said.

"Yeah, just be her assistant. Wipe their faces down."

"Oh, me!" Micona said, hand in the air. "I wanna be her assistant!"

The internship plans took a sharp turn, and the entire afternoon was now devoted to the thorn curse investigation.

The sun had long since set when Selen, Riho, and Phyllo were finally allowed to leave. They'd been put through their paces and all looked worn out.

"So exhausted." Selen sighed. "If I could at least walk home hand in hand with Sir Lloyd, I might be able to recuperate, but alas!"

She was dragging her feet. Lloyd's absence doubled the feeling of fatigue.

".....Can't argue, though. Only he can break the curse..."

That argument wasn't about to make Selen choke back her tears, though.

Marie and Lloyd (with Micona in tow) were visiting hospitals treating curse victims, using the *disenchant* rune on all of them. Since it was Lloyd using the rune, it really did have to be him.

"Even if you fall victim to the curse, Lloyd can fix it. That's huge. Now all we gotta do is pinpoint the cause and stop it from coming in...or he's gonna be stuck making these rounds the rest of his life. The internships were a pain, but any of that stuff would be better than this."

Rol had run them all ragged chasing down wine import data and trade routes, leaving Riho rubbing her eyes and grumbling.

"We must prove it's Jiou so we can ask Alka for help," Selen said.

Kunlun's chief had a rule that unless Dr. Eug and demon lords were involved, she couldn't help.

".....Even if we don't.....she'll help if Master asks her..."

Between her love for Lloyd and her nosy personality, she rarely upheld that rule, but...Alka herself probably hadn't realized that.

Either way, these three were confident Lloyd and Alka could contain the curse.

As they were about to step onto the main road, a voice croaked...

"Are you...Selen Hemein?"

She stopped and turned. There stood a well-dressed man with very dry skin. He was a bit too dressed up to be just walking around, and they were all immediately suspicious.

“That is my name.”

“Oh, good. Then you must be Riho Flavin and Phyllo Quinone?”

His smile was plastered on.

Riho looked him over. “So what if we are? If you’ve got manners, name yourself first.”

Her tone wasn’t exactly polite, but his smile failed to waver.

“That is true. My name is Tramadol. Like Selen here, I’m a local lord.”

There was little to no emotion in his voice. It was unsettling.

Phyllo recognized his name.

“.....From the data. On the border of Azami and Jiou.”

“I saw it an aggravating number of times myself. A region of vineyards, no less,” Riho growled.

“Yes,” Tramadol said, unfazed. “You’ve heard of it? That’s why I called out to you. You see, I could use your help with this curse that’s going around.”

That was not convincing.

“Then go to Central and talk to a real soldier. That’s not a thing you talk to a cadet about, even if you both are nobility.”

A fair point, but Tramadol didn’t budge.

“We can’t talk here...let’s move over there,” he said, pointing at an alley. He then darted off into it, as if fleeing the scene.

“.....Is he running away?”

“Who starts a conversation and then bolts?”

“Wait right there!”

All three of them chased after him, right into the alley.

“You’re not getting away—yiiikes!”

“What’s wrong, Selen? Augh!”

“.....Wait.....mm?”

Before them...was a sea. They were on a beach somehow. They looked around, confused. In the distance, they could see the lights of Azami's outer walls.

"I can see the Azami palace."

"So this is a transport spell?"

".....The one Eug used to get us to Kunlun?"

A hollow laugh sounded behind them.

"Ha-ha-ha, surprised? This coast is not far from Azami. This time of year, the jellyfish arrive in clusters. Ruins the romantic mood, you know. Won't be any couples here."

Tramadol seemed to be more talkative now. The girls raised their guard.

"And what's your deal? You say you want help with the curse but then bring us here?"

"That's right! I need your help. A man threatened me, forcing me to help spread the curse. All that work I did establishing a wine trading network! I detest seeing it used for this."

He got right to the heart of the matter.

".....You want to turn yourself in?"

"And that same man said if I *kill you*, he'll let me off the hook! Isn't that awful? So do this poor old man a favor and let me just murder you all."

"!"

Tramadol's aura changed. His face and body language radiated bloodlust.

Phyllo reacted first, quickly swinging a punch and sending a shock wave flying at him. The secret art she'd mastered in the Ascorbic Domain.

This attack could well be lethal, and even Selen was horrified.

"Wha—? Phyllo! Just because he threatened us—?"

".....If we don't, we're dead," Phyllo asserted.

"Selen, Phyllo's not wrong about that. Look."

Riho's eyes were locked on Tramadol—who'd absorbed Phyllo's strike without issue.

"Ha-ha, gosh, these were expensive, you know! Who's going to pay for this?"

Tramadol's expression never wavered, but he began gnawing on his fingernails, all his irritation directed at them.

All three girls uttered, ""Eww.""

Done biting his nails, he put both hands on the beach, leaning forward—like the starting position for a race, akin to an animal ready to pounce.

".....A sexy leopard pose?"

"Clearly not. No one wants to see some middle-aged man do that!"

Riho and Phyllo weren't dropping their stand-up act.

"Don't take your eyes off him!" Selen shouted.

On all fours, Tramadol was howling at the sea.

Vines and leaves sprouted all over his body, turning him into some sort of green leopard. Based on the shape of the leaves—those were, without a doubt, grapevines.

"I must regain my seat at the pinnacle of the local lords. But doing so requires your deaths. I'd rather not soil my own hands, but...they're now forelimbs!"

The voice was now emerging from a very long jaw.

As his shape changed, his personality...seemed increasingly unstable. His voice kept rising—until he launched himself forward.

"Local lords gotta stick together, right, cursed Belt Princess?!"

Talons split the sand, but Tramadol's blow was smoothly blocked by her namesake belt.

"Please!" Vritra said. "A blow like that could never harm my mistress."

"My, my, my! You blocked that?"

His claws were snagged in the belt itself, restricting his movements, giving the others an opening.

“.....Riho, with me.”

“Gotcha! *Thunderbolt!*”

Tramadol let out a shriek as Riho’s lightning coursed through him. “That tingles!”

Phyllo’s kick then pounded into his unprotected flanks, her full weight behind it.

“.....Hi-yah!”

Tramadol went flying like he’d been shot out of a cannon, far, far upward into the night sky.

“Augh! Who kicks a lord?!”

“Huh. He’s tough but not all that.”

“.....We’ve been through a lot ourselves.”

They’d fought Surtr’s duplicates, Abaddon’s locusts, and Micon’s copies. A foe like this posed no threat.

Tramadol landed hard, pulled himself out of the crater, and shook off the sand, growling.

“Nobody told me you were this strong! I thought this would be easier. *Sighhhh...*”

But he still sounded cocky.

And his sigh was a trap.

“If you’ve got time to sigh, why not just give it up, Your Lordship...erp?”

Mid-sentence, Riho lost her balance.

“Mwa-ha-ha-ha,” Selen cackled, looking triumphant. “Gotta watch your step, Riho—ohhh?”

No sooner had the words left her mouth than she staggered herself.

“.....!” Phyllo figured it out. “Riho! Selen! Don’t inhale his breath!”

She never raised her voice so sharply—but it was already too late. Phyllo herself was slowing down.

Seeing them sway, Tramadol stuck out his chin with a twisted smile.

“Heh-heh-heh... Is my breath too much for you children?”

His chuckles echoed across the beach.

“Damn, my head aches...,” Riho swore, clutching it. “What is this? Poison?”

“My head is swimming. I feel ill...” Selen had inhaled far too much, and she dropped to her knees.

Phyllo had managed to stay standing, though unsteadily, but Tramadol seemed sure victory was his.

“*Sighhhhh*... You can’t just not breathe, Phyllo.”

“.....”

“Speak up, child. No one can hold their breath for long. *Sighhhhh*...”

Poor thing. Soon, Phyllo, too, would succumb..., he thought.

“.....*Hic.*”

Phyllo seemed to have the hiccups. Her arms swung limp, her face went slack, and her eyes became empty—like a drunk’s.

“Ha-ha!” Tramadol cackled. “At your limit? The demon lord’s breath—”

“Yo.....”

“Is she?”

The other girls recognized the signs.

Alarmed, Riho yelled, “You, does your breath contain alcohol?! Are we drunk?!”

Tramadol looked baffled, so Selen swung unsteadily toward him.

“This is critical! You must tell us right away! Is this spiked?!”

He took a step backward, cowed. “W-well, um, I’m not all that clear on the particulars, but they do say alcohol is the best medicine, and many medicines are actually poisonous. That’s what leads people to drunken frenzies or blackouts. Ha-ha-ha!”

“Why are you laughing?! She’s drunk! Because of your alcohol breath!”

“Eeek!”

Selen’s harsh tone made him flinch despite his clear advantage.

“Good god...,” Riho wailed. “You’ve signed your own death warrant!”

Tramadol had no idea where these accusations were coming from.

“I-it’s working fine! My alcohol breath will be the death of *you*!”

“Oh, you’re gonna regret using this. We’ve seen her drunk before!”

A few months back...

Phyllo was at Hotel Reiyokaku on government work.

Mena had ordered some wine—which Phyllo mistook for grape juice. And she’d gone *buck wild*.



She'd run through her repertoire of joint locks and attacks on the furniture, smashing it all, and they'd stopped her only by sacrificing Lloyd's body.

Eyes unfocused, Phyllo lurched toward Tramadol.

"Wh-what? You're still standing?"

".....I wanna roll around."

""Nooooooooooooo!""

Visions of past trauma flooding their minds, Riho and Selen were reduced to tears.

The words she'd just let slip had been the precursor to her hotel havoc.

Tramadol growled like a cautious leopard, eyes locked on Phyllo.

"What are you so afraid—ugh!"

She was already on top of him, an arm clutch locked tight around his torso.

".....Can't wait.....haven't thrown a four-legged monster before....."

"W-wait.....*hngg!*"

Phyllo moved smoothly into an Argentine backbreaker, making sure his spine was shattered.

".....Hah! Hah!"

She then performed a suplex, slamming him headfirst into the sand, not once, not twice, but three times running!

"Augh! Augh! Augh!"

".....Hah! Hah! Hah! Hah! Hi-yah! Hah! Hah! Hah! Hi-yah! Hah! Hah! Hah! Hah! Hi-yah! Hah! Hah!"

Backdrop after backdrop, never a second's pause, like doing cartwheels down the shore. Sand sprayed so high, it seemed to land on the moon.

Tramadol's endurance was certainly demonic, but the infinite backdrop loop was crushing his spine and heart, and his screams were growing feeble.

The effect of his boozy breath was wearing off. Riho and Selen had both

managed to get on their feet, but the sight before them was so horrific, the pair remained quite pale.

“Uh, Selen... Is this gonna go on till Lloyd gets here?”

“I don’t even want to consider that.”

Not only was it *still* happening, but Phyllo seemed to be picking up speed. Her infinite spine-smashing spiral.

Just then, a very unfortunate boy came running toward them.

“Wh-what’s going on? Selen? Riho?”

They jumped.

“Er, Lloyd? Why...?”

“What brings you here? Did you sense I was in danger? Destiny brought you to me, Sir Lloyd!”

“Yeah, definitely not,” Riho scoffed.

Lloyd held up a big bottle, explaining. “You see, Micona told me to fetch some clean water. And a long time ago, the chief said water from the deep seabed is good for you, so I came to get some.”

That meant mineral-rich water from two hundred yards down, beyond the reach of sunlight...so normal people couldn’t exactly free-dive down to it.

It was obvious to the girls that Micona had made up an excuse to get rid of Lloyd.

Only Lloyd would get brushed off into twenty atmospheres of oceanic pressure.

Phyllo finally got bored with backflips—and her eyes locked with Lloyd’s.

“.....Master.....*hic*.”

The bleary look in her irises sent a shiver down Lloyd’s spine.

“Phyllo? What’s going on here? I-I’ve seen her like this before...”

“.....Master.”

“Y-yes?”

“.....I wanna roll around.”

“I knew it! She *is* drunk! Phyllo! Phy—noooooooooo!”

Schaaaaa.

The boy’s screams echoed across the shore.

Thanks to his heroic sacrifice, Phyllo’s rolling rampage finally subsided.

A few minutes later found them all limping back toward Azami.

“I didn’t think the local lord behind the thorn curse would attack in person...”

“And after our lives? I don’t get that at all.”

“The cost wasn’t worth it, but we did learn some stuff. Not enough, though. You with us, Lloyd?”

“Uh...”

“Guess not.”

Lloyd’s clothes were a wreck, and he was barely fighting back tears.

Selen had Tramadol wrapped in her belt and was dragging him after her, while Riho had Phyllo, sound asleep, under one arm.

“We’ll have to go to Central, track down Chrome, and fill him in... When will we ever go to bed?”

“Don’t even say that word, Selen. I’m trying not to think about it.”

“.....Mmph.”

Only Phyllo got to sleep on time that night. Riho glanced her way with a *very* sad smile.

Chapter 4

Known Flaws: If What You Lack Is Spelled Out for You

“What the hell, Sou?”

The setting: Tramadol’s manor, its master absent.

Sou stood on the balcony as if he were the owner, gazing at the world outside.

Behind him Shouma was radiating fury, yet Sou never even glanced his way, as if he had expected this.

“Tramadol?”

“Yeah! Why was he in Azami, and why’d you send him after Selen, Riho, and Phyllo?”

“Why are you angry? I spared you the trouble out of the kindness of my heart.”

“You said you’d leave the timing of their deaths to me!” Shouma yelled, pointing at himself. “Why didn’t you?”

Sou merely stared straight ahead, out across the vineyards.

After a long silence, he sighed and deigned to answer.

“Let me be honest, then. There is nothing you want less than to see Lloyd suffer.”

“.....Yeah.”

“If I leave this to you, you will never kill them. That’s why I sent Tramadol myself.”

Sou turned, leaning against the rail, looking Shouma right in the eye.

Shouma said nothing.

“But in time, they will betray Lloyd. If not that, they’ll grow to fear him and distance themselves. You know that better than anyone.”

“But they’re—”

“Different? How can you be sure?”

Sou leaned forward.

Shouma could not answer.

“ ”

“And the greater your faith, the harder the betrayal hits. When he learns that being from Kunlun makes him different from other humans... Well, you remember the loss of your own passion. Could Lloyd survive that?”

“Well...”

Sou patted Shouma gently on the shoulder.

“As long as the chance remains, they should die while they are still good friends. That would cause less agony than the alternative.”

Shouma’s gaze drifted to the floor.

“Place the full burden of this sin on my shoulders. As the villain, Lloyd will come to kill me. His grief will forge a new hero, and his saga will have begun in earnest.”

He gave Shouma’s shoulder a squeeze, then leaned back against the rail, gazing at the vineyards once more.

“Tramadol failed, and as a result, tomorrow the Azami army will come storming in here. That will be the time. I can kill them myself, but would you mind doing the honors, Shouma? I know you can ensure they will not suffer.”

As if in answer, the grape leaves began to stir. In mere moments, they’d formed a natural labyrinth around the manor.

“An application of the demon lord’s power. We must thank Dr. Eug,” Sou whispered.

Never taking his eyes off the floor, Shouma made up his mind. “Okay,” he said.

“You wish to make Lloyd a hero, and I wish to disappear. Our goals are the same.”

“.....I know, Sou.”

But Shouma’s head stayed down as he left the room.

Only when he was out of sight did a trace of regret cross Sou’s face.

“Sorry, Shouma. Keep them busy so they can’t interfere. That cursed belt and mithril arm could spell trouble. And I must ensure Lloyd dies...”

Like Shouma’s, his eyes drifted to the floor. It was as if he was trying to persuade himself.

“It must be done. His death is the only way I can disappear.”

Meanwhile, back at Azami castle...

Night had already fallen, and the halls and rooms of the castle were softly lit by magic stones.

In one such room sat Chrome, Choline, Lloyd’s group, the king of Azami, and the Rokujou royal couple, all looking solemn.

On the floor in the center of the room was Tramadol, still transformed, bound tightly by Selen’s belt. Like a beast made of grapevines and thorn-studded vegetation, he made her look like a hunter hauling back their prey.

“...That’s all we really got. Phyllo was frankly way more dangerous.”

Riho had been briefing everyone on the situation. Lloyd’s evident fatigue really sold everyone on how much worse Phyllo’s drunken rampage had been than Tramadol’s attack.

“Well, that explains why Lloyd looks like he took a beating and Phyllo’s out cold.”

“When she gets like that...nothing else can stop her.”

Choline and Mena both laughed. Phyllo was sound asleep on Ubi’s knees.

“We’re not clear why someone was after our lives, but it seems like this whole curse mess stemmed from the local lord here.”

The belt yanked Tramadol upward. Now she looked like an angler displaying her catch.

“But that doesn’t solve much of anything,” the king said. “He mentioned the real mastermind, yes?”

Choline looked up from her documents.

“Even with him down, we’ve still got suspected thorn curse cases flooding in. There may be more asymptomatic infections out there, so...keep your eyes open.”

“We’ll have to check every stall on his trade route. If we don’t catch this mastermind, he might well just do the same thing elsewhere.”

Chrome looked very tired. Thinking of the labor ahead, he already had a headache. Confiscating all the wine and having Lloyd *disenchant* everyone.

“Don’t worry, Chrome,” Marie said, smiling. “I can use that rune, too, and I know someone I can ask for medicinal advice. Whether she’s actually human is another matter, but since we know a demon lord’s involved, she’ll help.”

Most people immediately knew she was referring to the infamous kid grandma.

“But if this is a demon lord, then the mastermind might be Dr. Eug and the sinister Sou.”

“And maybe my brother, Shouma.”

Sensing the room was taking a gloomy turn, Mena cut in, her voice bright.

“Welp, we’ll have to hit Tramadol’s place and gather evidence, see if we can pinpoint the real crook.”

Chrome nodded and turned to the cadets.

“Mmm, I’d like to head out tomorrow morning.”

“And you want us providing backup? Ugh.”

They’d just fought Tramadol and would be right back at work in the morning. Riho did not look pleased.

“I know you’re tired, and I’m sorry,” Rol said. “But you cadets will be the first

up.”

“What?!” Riho spun toward her. “Why?! We’re students! Use real soldiers!”

Rol tapped her temple. “Think about it,” she said. “We’re pretty sure this wine’s behind the thorn curse. That means this plan requires people who *haven’t* drunk any. Which means cadets. Unless you’re downing the bottle on the sly?”

“God, no. But yeah, okay. That makes sense.”

Rol’s joke had highlighted the obvious conclusion Riho had been too tired to draw.

“If we head in and everyone starts acting like Ubi or Renge, it would be a disaster.”

“Exactly, Lloyd,” Chrome said, patting his shoulder. “They wouldn’t be *that* bad, but the chain of command would break down. Still, you’re all tired, so you’ll be on the afternoon cleanup crew.”

“Good,” Selen said. “I need my beauty sleep.”

“So the first squad will be the upperclassmen!” Micona huffed. “We await your orders, Colonel Chrome! Don’t worry, first-years. Sleep all you like! We’ll have it done before you get there.”

“That would be a relief.” Riho sighed.

“Good enthusiasm, Micona,” commended Rol. “Let’s start planning for tomorrow. And a bright future for all of us.”

Rol winked. For her promotions and Micona’s future position...they oughta work together.

“Gladly!”

Micona took the bait, and they headed into a room in back.

“Rol always did have an eye for anyone she could use...,” Riho muttered.

The clock struck midnight.

“That late?” remarked the king. “You’ve got work tomorrow, so best if you stay here tonight.”

“Er, are you sure?” Lloyd asked. “We’re just cadets!”

“Ho-ho-ho! Not a problem. Mena, see that their rooms are ready.”

“You got it. This way.”

She threw up a jaunty salute and led the cadets away.

“Huff! Sharing a roof with Sir Lloyd! At the castle! Something’s bound to happen!”

“What happened to your beauty sleep? But this is exciting. You don’t get to sleep at the castle every day.”

“I can’t believe you’re trying to start trouble here, too, Selen. I’ll carry Phyllo.”

The king watched them clustering around Lloyd and smiled.

“He’s always at the center, isn’t he?”

“Um, Your Majesty,” probed Marie shiftily. “Am I staying, too?”

“But of course! Enjoy your time here. We’ve got a huge bath now! Room for everyone.”

Lloyd noticed the king’s sudden change of attitude and thought, *Of course the king trusts Marie! She’s Azami’s savior!*

He’s never going to work out the whole princess thing.

Preparing for the next day, Lloyd was treated for his injuries and shown to a guest room, while Marie and the relatively unharmed girls headed for the bath.

The Azami Bathhouse.

Wanting his daughter to come home and racking his brains for ideas that might lure her back, the king had been hit with a fit of madness, convincing him that “a gigantic bath” would do the trick. In mere weeks, it was designed, built, and functional—a crystallization of parental love.

He’d plowed through vehement opposition (it was a complete waste of money), and the labor had been backbreaking, but it had proved quite a hit with soldiers posted to the castle and had done wonders for his approval ratings.

While his staff might have adored it, his actual daughter had just scoffed, “That’s dumb.”

Oh, and having been introduced by the Reiyokaku owner, former head guard Coba, the king had hired the architect who’d built their baths, using plenty of cedar grown by Allan’s father, Threonine, resulting in a beautifully austere aesthetic.

Clonk.

Savoring the cedar scent, the girls filed in. Like gladiators after a battle.

“Warriors, to the water! Plunge your bodies covered in grime! Marie the Witch reverted to her true form! Maria Azami in the bath!”

“Menaah, not to bust yer bubble, but we got a long day tomorrow. Let’s just get the heck in.”

Choline was far too exhausted for Mena’s stupid shenanigans.

“Yeesh, you *must* be tired. Fair enough.”

“You were *just* talking trash about me, though?”

“Now, now, Your Highness, it’s the tax you pay for being that stacked.”

“They aren’t worth paying for, I promise.”

Most citizens would probably decry such a tax, but those here were too tired to argue. Selen and Riho were busy washing off the sand.

“Ugh, it’s in my hair. Dumb demon lord.”

“I had some in my ears! Why couldn’t Tramadol have taken us to a grassy plain?”

Their battle with Tramadol had incurred an unexpected toll.

“That all sounds rough,” Choline said, sinking into the water. “But...you’re chewing out a demon lord? The things we get used to.”

Marie was looking around the bath made just for her and sighing.

“Geez, Dad. Didn’t even ask me...”

“Don’t think about it, Princess. We all get to enjoy it, so it’s a win-win.”

“Ah-ha-ha. That’s some small comfort anyway...mm? Where’s Phyllo?”

As Marie’s head turned, the sauna door opened, and Phyllo came out, steam rising off her. The sauna had evaporated the remnants of Tramadol’s alcohol breath left in her body.

“.....Revived.”

“Is there a law that says we only take baths together when you’re drunk?”

“.....Mmm? Was I?”

“Oh, right,” Marie grumbled. “You all bathed at Reiyokaku together. Wish I could have been there. But, ugh, the memories coming back are making me shiver.”

She alone had been excluded, propped up as a detective and forced to solve a crime she knew nothing about. She’d run the gamut from flop sweat to cold sweat and had been traumatized.

“Nothing worse than being the odd woman out on a vacation. You have my sympathies, Your Highness.”

Free of sand, Riho and Selen joined them in the main bath.

“Guess this whole intern thing got thrown out with the bathwater, huh?”

“And after they moved the whole thing up just for Lloyd.”

“Mm? Why for him?” Marie frowned.

“Oh, about that—” Mena gave her the gist. She left out the king’s attempts to hook Lloyd and Marie up, though. A wise choice. Tomorrow would be frantic enough without a civil war breaking out. Wouldn’t want these bath spouts giving way to blood geysers, would we?

Marie scratched her cheek, considering it. “I guess that adds up... It does sound like something my father would do.”

“Can’t blame him, Yer Highness. So much was off the books and, on the face of it, unbelievable. If we try and publicize his deeds, people’ll just laugh.”

“So every department was gunning hard for Lloyd’s attention. It was a disaster, right?”

Riho remembered the palpable desperation. “Yeah, they didn’t even try to hide the favoritism. Micona was grinding her teeth the whole time. She’s going to have those things worn down like a herbivore’s.”

“If she hears she missed a chance to bathe with Marie, she may not stop there,” Selen added.

Micona had no luck.

“Right, the gods are never on her side. She could be—?”

“She could be what?” Marie asked.

“Never mind.”

Marie had yet to perceive the truth about Micona—that she loved Marie far too much to ever actually tell her. Definitely a case of ignorance being bliss.

“Don’t be like that! Selen, clue me in!”

“That’s a big ‘never mind’ from me, too.”

Meanwhile, Phyllo was just staring fixedly at Marie, face half submerged like a crocodile.

“Mm? What’s up, Phyllo?”

She waded through the water, slowly approaching—and her hands clamped down on Marie’s boobs.

“Eeek! Wha-wha-wha—Phyllo!”

“.....Big, and this palm-feel...they’re *real*.”

“Wait, Phyllo? What else would they be?”

Unable to hide her shock at Marie’s figure, Phyllo explained the reason for her full-frontal assault.

“.....I knew they were big.....but I wondered if you’d had enhancement surgery as part of your disguise.....like those fake glasses...”

“Buying fake glasses and getting implants are miles apart! They’re all natural, no additives. And they’re not that great! Makes your back stiff, and if you drop something, you can’t just scoop it up—”

Marie was in full humblebrag mode.

“Okay, is this spite directed at me? Never had a stiff shoulder! Can drop all the things I like!”

Riho gave Marie’s chest a furious glare, then sank into the water, blowing bubbles.

“Uh, Riho? I’m being serious...”

“Selen, Phyllo. Dunk her.”

“.....Aye-aye.”

“In!”

“Wait—aughhhhh!”

Marie’s screams echoed throughout the bath. Mena and Choline would later agree it was *definitely* for the best Micona hadn’t been there.

While the girls were relaxing and squealing...

Lloyd, clad in the castle-provided soft pajamas and fluffy slippers and tired from his long day of helping Marie and stopping Phyllo’s rampage, was lying facedown on a magnificent bed, feeling very pampered.

The luxurious feather-stuffed mattress beneath him took a load off his shoulders, and all the stress of staying in the castle dissolved.

“Everything’s getting so crazy.” He sighed.

The internships to determine his future had gotten completely tossed to the side in the chaos, and he was somewhat frustrated by that.

“.....Being a soldier really is hard work. Nothing goes as planned. If something comes up, you’ve got to drop everything and run in. Sometimes, the people hate you or blame you for everything, and you’ve got to take responsibility, but...”

He rolled over, smiling to himself.

“When your work brightens their day, it sure does feel good.”

Lloyd remembered the thanks he’d received for all the odd jobs he’d done

this year, and his smile broadened to a grin.

“That’s why I’ve gotta do this right. Figure out what I can do and which post will let me do that best,” he declared, eyes fixed on the ceiling.

Just then, there was a soft knock at the door.

“It’s open! Come on in,” he called, assuming it was Marie or Chrome.

“Pardon the intrusion.”

“Er...huh?!”

The king had stepped in. He’d lost the cape, crown, and regal accoutrements, and it had taken Lloyd a second to place him. Once he did, though, he fell out of bed from shock.

“Y-Y-Your Majesty...?!”

“Ha-ha-ha, didn’t mean to startle you. My apologies.”

The king smiled as Lloyd snapped to attention and saluted.

“No need for the formality. Please have a seat.”

The king himself pulled up a chair, waving Lloyd to sit. The boy took a seat on the bed, but his back remained straight. He *was* in a room with the king.

“S-so what brings you here, Your Majesty? Has our departure time changed? No, they wouldn’t send *you* for that...”

His voice broke a bit, and the king chuckled.

“No, no, this isn’t about tomorrow or the curse.”

“O-okay...”

The king looked him right in the eyes.

“Lloyd, I wanted to ask you something. Nothing difficult, I promise.”

“Um, go ahead.”

“Once you graduate from the academy, where do you want to be posted?”

The very thing he’d just been fretting about. It was like the king had read his mind.

“Um, why would you be—? Sorry, can’t be rattled here.”

Lloyd took a few deep breaths, settling down, then gave his answer.

“Um, that’s what I was *just* thinking about. I still don’t know. I appreciate the offers from the PR, security, diplomacy, and intelligence departments, but...”

“Hmm, lots of good places to work. Are you struggling to choose just one?”

“That’s not it, no. I keep going in circles, trying to figure out what would be the best fit for me, who would make the best use of me, and where I could make the most people happy.”

“I see! You’ve got your eyes set on life after you become a soldier. I heard you were an earnest young man, and this certainly confirms that. Personally, I was born into royalty, and my duties were set in stone. I never had a chance to worry about such things.”

“I-I’m certainly not that amazing. Um...”

“Yes?”

“Is that all you want to talk about?”

“What could be more important?”

That just confused Lloyd further.

“Um...it’s just the career path of one cadet. Hardly worthy of a king’s attention.”

The king hesitated about whether to say the next bit or not but soon made up his mind.

“Fact is, Lloyd—this is not for public knowledge, so please tell no one else.”

“O-of course! Sworn to silence.”

Seeing the king look so glum, Lloyd stiffened his spine even more.

“You really are diligent,” the king remarked, smiling. “Thing is, I’ve heard my daughter is in love with you.”

“Hah.....huh?!”

Lloyd’s “surprised” look was so picture-perfect that the king grimaced.

“I suppose that is shocking news. It certainly caught me off guard!”

“Your daughter would be...?”

“Yes, the princess, Maria.”

Assumed this must be some sort of joke, Lloyd gave the king a searching look, but the monarch’s eyes were clearly serious—frankly, he looked ready to cry, which made Lloyd start to sweat. Even though he’d just been in the bath.

“Th-that’s, um... Well...but how does that relate to my future job?”

“I would think that obvious, Lloyd,” the king said, stroking his beard. “I wanted to make sure the boy my daughter loves was thinking carefully about his future. If you wish to date royalty, your career will be of the utmost importance.”

The king avoided directly suggesting that he might be inclined to meddle, but that was clearly the subtext here.

Lloyd had been worried enough about this to begin with, and now there was even more pressure on him...involving romance, a concept he was entirely unprepared to deal with. Hearing secondhand about these feelings—and a princess’s, no less—was enough to make any mind melt.

“Um, so...this is all so sudden. Sorry!”

Before he knew it, he was on his knees on the bed, bowing his head.

“Calm yourself,” the king said. “I don’t want to rush you to an answer. You’ve got enough to deal with tomorrow without me muddying the waters. But as a father, I was curious—and with you staying at the castle, this was an opportunity I couldn’t let slip away.”

He patted Lloyd on the shoulder, changing the subject.

“First, get through tomorrow. Good luck searching Tramadol’s manor.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“Don’t fret too much about the future. Take your time and find your answer.”

“I’ll do that.”

“I’d better go. As for my daughter...well, just bear it in mind. You never

know!”

“Uh, right... Good night!”

“I’m sure my late wife, Rien, wants nothing more than Maria’s happiness,” the king whispered to himself. He glanced back at Lloyd.

“Sleep well,” he said, and Lloyd bowed him out of the room.

Lloyd had been tense enough just talking to someone that important, and the unexpected bombshell about love made it worse. All that disappeared the moment the door closed, and he fell over on the bed.

“The princess loves...? But why would she? I’m nobody. It must be like Selen’s jokes.”

Weep away, Selen. Then again, her approaches were often so outlandish that Lloyd had reasonably processed them all as elaborate practical jokes.

“I guess I have been accomplishing more lately. The Military Festival, especially. Satan really helped me gain some real strength. But I’m still a long way from everyone back home. I’ll never catch up with the chief or Shouma.”

Comparing himself to those superhumans left Lloyd permanently unable to accurately assess himself. But he *was* making progress and no longer convinced he was legitimately weak.

He rolled over, sighing.

“The princess... I wonder what she’s like...”

Hearing about this secondhand made it tough to gauge how serious her affection was. He could only guess. It was all too much information for one day, and he buried his face in the pillow, groaning.

Lloyd had no idea Marie was the princess and was unlikely to notice that anytime soon, so the princess in his mind was an entirely fictional creation.

“! Argh, don’t. Focus on tomorrow’s mission and then on the internships. But a princess... If I turn her down, I’ll never hear the end of it.”

He was embarking on a new career path and walking into unfamiliar romantic terrain. Even if someone straight-up told him the princess was the witch he

lived with, he likely wouldn't believe it. Marie had actually said it aloud several times herself, which he'd brushed off as a joke, so... Much like Selen's affection, his compartmentalization skills were sometimes rather galling.

Lloyd lay there worrying until sleep overtook him.

As the sun rose the next morning, Lloyd and the girls were eating a late breakfast in a large hall. Unused to having a meal waiting for him, Lloyd was somehow making the act of eating toast look apologetic.

"Castle breakfast sure is good."

"My! Fresh squeezed orange juice? I must have another!"

".....Why am I so hungry? I don't remember yesterday... Did I work out?"

Not one of the girls was holding back. They all knew Marie was the princess, so there seemed little point.

They were enjoying the buffet like they were hanging out at a luxury hotel managed by a friend.

"Has Micona's team already set out?" Lloyd asked.

"Quite a while ago," replied Marie, looking deeply uncomfortable to be home again. "She seemed pretty fired up. 'I'll impress everyone! Lloyd Belladonna will not outshine me here!' She's really fixated on you, huh? Any clue why?"

"Best not to question that, Marie," Riho advised.

"Riho's right! Right, Phyllo?"

".....Can't disagree."

Nobody could sit before the king and explain that Micona was so madly in love with Marie that she'd crossed all kinds of lines. The food would turn to ash in their mouths.

As an awkward silence settled, Allan bit a chunk out of his apple—he'd finally woken up—and nodded away. Mena had been getting him up to speed.

"Can't believe I was out the whole time. I'm a disgrace! Have to start redeeming myself quick. I'll do whatever it takes!"

"Well, Tramadol's already in custody, so the rest is just cleanup."

“Don’t do that to me, Mena! Where am I supposed to direct this motivation?”

“Ah-ha-ha! Convert it to love and aim it at your wife.”

“Don’t poke that sore spot, Mena,” Chrome growled. “But with Micona on the job, there’s not much that could pose a problem.”

“Yep,” Choline added. “The main thing’s the curse itself. Merthophan, is the professional still not here yet?”

He’d been busy cutting fruit into bite-sized pieces but glanced up at the clock.

“Mm, shouldn’t be long. But she is rather temperamental.”

“Ex-Colonel Merthophan, by ‘she’ do you mean—?”

But before Marie could name her suspect...

“Anyone home?”

A familiar little girl popped out—from under Marie’s skirt.

“Aiiiiiiee! Kid grandma, why were you in *there*?!”

“I mean, I usually use the closet but figured that was getting boring, so I phased through the floor from below.”

“I do apologize,” Merthophan said, like he was her manager. “I should have realized something was up the moment she started grumbling about her tricks being old.”

The surprise entrance had certainly flummoxed Marie, and Alka looked quite proud of herself. Then when she spotted Lloyd, all sense of propriety went out the window.

“Llooooooooooyd! I miiiiiiised youuuuu!”

Her behavior patterns were a known element, and the girls had already been moving to block this dive. Like Lloyd’s personal secret service team.

“Hands off Sir Lloyd!” Selen snapped. “This is the Azami castle! You will behave for once, Alka!”

“Who was it who threatened to start stuff yesterday?”

Everyone present found themselves wondering if it wouldn’t be best, for

Lloyd's sake, to see *both* these two locked up.

Phyllo swiftly had Alka in a full nelson and dragged her away like a fan who'd gone over her time limit at a handshake event.

".....Okay, okay. Work first. We need your hands on...this thing."

She led Alka to the belt-bound Tramadol.

"Who's this?"

".....Well, the long and short of it is—"

"My Lloyd—and shirtless?! Well, I'm on it now. This is clearly a demon lord. Looks and acts just like Dionysos. Yeah, he always did look like a leopard."

"Diony-what?"

Marie hadn't heard that name before.

"Yeah, basically...the demon lord of alcohol. Looks like he slipped out of the Last Dungeon and Eug caught him, took the demon lord's power, and had it possess this geezer."

She grunted and took a closer look. She peeled back one of the grape leaves.

"Notable abilities include producing a drug you get from the extract on these leaves. You need a large amount, though... Got any more?"

Alka started searching his body, and Tramadol groaned.

"Stop...stop...! Sou, Shouma...Lady Eve!"

Eve.

Alka's eyes lit up at the name.

"Did you say...Eve?"

"Eve? As in the King of Profen? Why—?"

The great central kingdom. Smack in the middle of the continent, it was one of Azami's allies.

The person in power was Eve Profen. Infamous for her rabbit costume, her true nature was President Eva, employer of Alka back in her scientist days. They had a *long* history.

Hearing that name alongside Sou's and Shouma's rattled her.

"Why would she be mixed up with Sou?"

And if Alka was rattled, everyone around was, too.

"B-bad news!"

Rol burst into the room, running so fast, she'd taken off her high heels. She normally maintained a degree of composure, but not today.

"What's wrong, Rol? What happened?"

Seeing Rol struggling to catch her breath, Riho handed her a glass of water, which she downed in one gulp.

"Micona's team left this morning to start the investigation of Tramadol's manor...and they've been wiped out."

""""Wiped out?!""""

She nodded again, explaining.

"When we got there, we found the entire area covered in vines, like a maze or a fortress. When we tried cutting through with swords and knives, a strange gas gushed out..."

"Like the alcohol breath? That works without Tramadol?"

But Rol was already shaking her head.

"No, this one's worse. Cadets who got a brief whiff seemed drunk and passed out, but anyone exposed for longer...developed curse symptoms."

"Thorn curse?! And I thought the stuff Selen, Phyllo, and I got was trouble!"

Phyllo had retained no memories of the incident and looked rather surprised.

".....I inhaled that? Why don't I remember?"

"Phyllo was bad enough as is!" Selen shuddered. "If she'd gotten the curse on top of that, we'd have been doomed."

She might have subjected them *all* them to her full repertoire of attacks.

"Micona managed to drag everyone to safety, but..."

Micono appeared behind Rol, looking very tired. The injured cadets stood behind her.

“Micono! You’re safe!”

Everyone ran up to her, and she scowled.

“Lloyd Belladonna...”

“Are you okay? Rol was just telling us what happened.”

“Clearly not. It was far worse than anticipated.”

She *must* be tired. She didn’t even brush him off!

“Not like Micono to skip the spite! This *is* serious. Any more info you can give us?”

“I’m sure Rol already told you, but we ran in and got a face full of alcohol breath. The front-runners all started acting drunk...and then emotionally volatile, like with that curse. It was a handful.”

She’d clearly borne the brunt of it.

Leaning heavily on a classmate’s shoulder, glasses girl added, “Micono’s treant power drained the energy from anyone who started running amok, but... well, you can see how bad it got.”

She adjusted her glasses, pointing at some half-naked, unconscious soldiers.

“.....Drunks who strip.....the worst kind...”

“Better than popping people’s joints!” Riho hissed.

Micono sighed and turned returned her gaze to Lloyd.

“I don’t wanna see any of you like that. Especially Allan. Any way to defend against it?”

Allan reeled, tears welling up, but everyone ignored him.

Merthophan nodded. “.....We’re working on it, Micono.”

Behind the sobbing Allan, Alka was looking unusually serious, making some sort of medicine from the leaves she’d harvested.

This involved inscribing runes on her tiny palms, then squeezing the leaves,

letting a purple fluid drip out.

She put that in a nearby mug and diluted it in water.

“Hmm, I think I’ve got enough for six here,” she said, pouring it into that many cups.

“Chief, what is it?” Lloyd asked, looking anxious.

“A potion that’ll make you resistant against those fumes. One dose of this, and you can fight off Dionysos’s poison for a full day. I’ll have to make an antidote for those already affected next—but that’ll take a bit more time.”

Alka handed him a cup.

“And...sorry, Lloyd. I’m the one who’s supposed to be out there fighting demon lords, but that poison’s a bit tricky. I’m gonna have to be the one to *disenchant* ’em, and—”

“And what?”

With a dismal face, she jerked her thumb at Tramadol.

“I’ve gotta poke around inside *his* head.”

Marie blinked. “What exactly does *that* mean?”

“If this mess was just Sou, Shouma, and Eug, that’d be one thing. But if Lady Eve of Profen is involved, then the tides are shifting.”

No one here knew their history, so they just looked puzzled.

“Sorry,” Alka said. Her expression was somber, and they didn’t have the heart to pry further.

“All right, Master.”

“It might just be nothing, but I wanna check inside his brain while the memories are still fresh. I’ll catch up when that’s done.”

She bowed her head once more, and Lloyd patted her shoulder.

“Don’t worry, Chief. I’ll—well, not just me. Selen, Riho, Phyllo, and Allan are with me. We’ll manage.”

He downed the potion and beamed at her.

Alka's eyes went wide, then...

"Oh, how you've grown, Lloyd!"

She seemed genuinely touched.

"I may have been the weakest kid back home, but I'm finally starting to find myself. Thanks to everyone here."



Where he'd grown up had been *too* strong for him to ever gain confidence.

But time had passed, he'd made friends, found a master, and matured.

"Grown and changed the way you think! You're a man now, Lloyd!"

Alka usually only talked like this when she was angling for an embrace, but not today.

"I drink milk every day!" Lloyd said, grinning. "That's a joke," he added, suddenly less sure of himself.

But Alka was pleased with this newfound comedy skill.

"All right!" Allan bellowed. "I'm going, too! Gotta back Lloyd up!"

".....Mmm."

"If I'm not there with Sir Lloyd, nothing will get done."

"I bet it would... Still, someone ought to keep you in check, so it might as well be me."

Each took a swig.

"Thanks, everyone."

And the last dose—

"I'll go," Merthophan said, snatching it up.

"Merthophan?!"

"Azami's in danger. It's a chance to atone for my sins, but more than that—I cannot stand idly by while some fiend uses wine for evil. Wine made from grapes poor farmworkers poured their souls into."

There went the Kunlun farming spirit. Choline was clutching her head.

"Alka made this medicine and has promised to personally treat the victims. We have nothing to fear."

"Indeed. Who could be better?" Miconna concurred. She had the utmost faith in Alka.

"When did you two get that close?"

“We’re soul mates.”

This was less about female empathy than lust-fueled solidarity.

The speed with which Micona had answered left Lloyd instinctively reluctant to pursue the matter further.

“At the very least, we can stop the curse from spreading again,” Micona said. “I’ve had my fill of such depravity. Even when I’m old enough to drink, I have no plans to begin.”

But if Marie was invited, she would probably cancel all other plans to be there.

“If we’d let them keep at it, we might well have borne witness to lewd sights like men hugging each other and more! Such a tragedy,” glasses girl said, pushing up her frames.

Clearly, glasses girl had recovered enough to joke about these things, assuming she was joking.

“Losing your whole team *is* the real tragedy,” Lloyd pointed out.

“Right you are!” She beamed.

“But the upshot is, we learned nothing about the interior. As much as I hate to do this, we have no choice but to entrust this mission to you, Lloyd Belladonna.”

“Roger! As the head of the first-years, I promise we’ll complete the task!”

“He always looks most sure of himself when his comrades’ lives are on the line,” glasses girl said. “Remind you of anyone, Micona?” Glasses push.

“.....We are *nothing* alike.”

“Yes, you’re mostly concerned with your *reputation*.” Glasses girl again performed her signature move.

This was clearly intended as a compliment.

Micona looked embarrassed and averted her eyes. To cover this, she went back to exhorting Lloyd.

“The reputation of the Azami army lies on your shoulders, Lloyd Belladonna.

Remember to always conduct yourself with dignity.”

“Will do! Leave the rest to us,” he said.

“As a fellow stalker, I accept this baton pass. Rest easy, Micona.”

“As a what? But fair, we got this one. You focus on the wounded.”

“.....Trust us.”

Merthophan gave her an approving nod.

“Micona Zol, you’ve taken a huge step forward while I wasn’t looking. You were so competitive, but now you’re offering words of encouragement.”

“Well,” she said, making a face. “I may have grown wings and learned to manipulate tree roots in the process...”

On that questionable note of self-reflection, the party set out to Tramadol’s manor—now a thorn fortress.

Leaving Alka and the others behind, Lloyd’s group piled into a carriage with Merthophan at the reins.

The vehicle rushed along well-paved roads toward the mansion.

Having learned the fate of Micona’s team, everyone felt anxious.

“I can’t believe anyone defeated Micona! I’m so scared, Sir Lloyd!”

“.....Me too.”

Yeah, that’ll never happen.

“Micona’s failure is not an excuse to get clingy!” Allan yelled. “Do you people not know when to stress out?”

“You stress out enough for the lot of us,” Riho said, poking him. “Alka’s medicine made us all immune to the alcohol miasma, so what’s to be afraid of? We’ve got *Lloyd*.”

Alka’s antidote had certainly restored a sense of normalcy. Even if they did run into Sou or Shouma—well, they both loved Lloyd so much, they’d hardly try to hurt him. They seemed far more likely to start snapping pictures or filming videos. That had happened enough times that Riho was rather counting on it.

“Ah-ha-ha, Riho, now you’re stressing me out.”

“Oops, sorry, Lloyd. Didn’t mean to! But Alka’ll catch up eventually, so let’s just take it easy.”

She leaned back against the seat. Her words helped ease the tension.

Little did she know that *this time* Sou and Shouma were both out for blood. Their previous behavior had hardly made them seem like a viable threat.

The carriage rattled along for a while.

Then, the distinct smell of vineyards swept in through the carriage windows.

“Almost there. Tramadol’s manor is at the top of this hill—*hngg?!?*”

Merthophan yelped, and everyone leaned out, peering ahead.

Tramadol’s estate loomed ominously, every inch of it covered in thorns—a living fortress.

“I heard the report, but seeing it sure hits different.”

“.....Mmm.....way more intimidating.”

“More than just a lack of groundskeeping, that’s for sure.”

“It looks haunted. I’m not so good with ghosts.”

“The grounds and the garden have become a massive thorn labyrinth.”

They alighted but found themselves just staring.

“It gets worse when you get closer. This thing is a biodungeon.”

The hedges that Tramadol’s garden staff had once toiled over were now entwined with briars and grapevines and formed an arched entrance, welcoming the visitors in. Beyond it lay a maze of poisonous-looking plants, and the grape-like fruit lining the passages occasionally burst, releasing clouds of toxic gas.

“This is the so-called alcohol breath? Ew, I can smell it from here.”

Allan was already holding his nose. The odor wasn’t exactly fruity. It smelled as if someone had spilled the undiluted fluid from an air freshener.

“Chief Alka promised her draft would nullify the poison, but the smell alone is

troublesome. Nobody's making perfumes from *this*."

".....But this is the only way in. The thorns have the manor buried, and we can't get in from above. And..."

Phyllo pointed. Not far inside, the path split in three.

"Multiple routes," Lloyd said. "With these numbers, we should probably split up."

"Clearly, Sir Lloyd and I will be one pair. The rest of you choose among yourselves."

"Selen, at a time like this, you really should drop this kind of stuff. Let's RPS this thing."

".....And the party strategist tries to give herself the advantage."

"Huh?! Huh?! I am not!"

Merthophan looked immensely pleased by their all-too-typical behavior.

"With a lineup this powerful, the farms of Azami have a bright future."

He was as bad as the rest of them.

The RPS tournament was starting up. Selen was preemptively announcing her choices and making a hash of the whole thing, but the final results: Selen and Phyllo. Riho and Merthophan. Lloyd and Allan.

All in all, an arrangement everyone could stomach.

"Relatively safe. No clear incidents afoot."

".....We've thwarted potential crimes."

"Who do you all think I am?"

Selen, clearly. Known stalker-at-large.

Each of these pairs took a path.

It was the last time they'd ever see each other—well, not really, but they were certainly not anticipating the chaos about to ensue.

"Man, the color of these fumes is getting denser."

Lloyd and Allan were proceeding with caution down their path. Both had the skills but fundamentally timid dispositions, so they were scoping every corner with care, moving forward only when they were confident it was safe. Like two scaredy-cats in a haunted house.

“Can’t bear seeing a local lord’s manor reduced to this. We’ve gotta be careful ourselves. I doubt my dad would be tempted into any dubious bargains, but...”

While Allan was worried about his home, Lloyd was looking restless—like he really wanted to talk to Allan about something.

Eventually, Allan noticed and tried to draw it out of him.

“What’s on your mind, Lloyd? This maze bugging you?”

“No, well, yes, but...” He hesitated, then said, “Um, I know it’s a bad time, but there’s something I need to ask you.”

“Shoot. I’m an open book!”

“You’ve...met the king of Azami before, right?”

“Uh, yeah, him and the military bigwigs.” Allan grimaced. “All part of that thing to prop me up as the next big hope. Lots of banquets—all going right to my waistline.”

“But have you met the princess?”

Allan blinked. He hadn’t expected that.

“Never, no. She vanished a long time ago, and rumor has it she’s safe and sound but still hasn’t made any public appearances. What about her?”

“Um...” Lloyd had to think about it again, but then gave Allan a serious look and said, “Promise you’ll keep this a secret!”

“Absolutely!” Allan proclaimed, thumping his chest. “I keep secrets like oysters keep pearls!”

Though those open pretty readily if you sprinkle alcohol on them or roast them on a grill...

That aside, Allan’s point got across, so Lloyd shared his conversation with the king.

“Apparently, the princess...has romantic feelings for me.”

He blushed, looking mortified at the very thought.

“She what? Well, a boy like you would certainly charm the hearts of any lady, princess or not.”

Lloyd scratched his cheek. “I doubt that...,” he muttered timidly. He may have amassed more confidence in military matters but not so much when it came to matters of the heart.

“I’ve never even met her, so hearing about it secondhand...I just don’t know what to do with that information.”

He was getting fidgety, and Allan nodded.

“Yeah, definitely something you don’t want to bring up in mixed company. Or really with anyone but me. I’m a bit jealous! I dreamed about having that kind of tentative romance myself.”

A tear rolled down his cheek. He’d skipped the entire romance phase and started with marriage. Perhaps a gripe that would earn him some eye rolls.

“I’m just not ready,” Lloyd said, still fidgeting. “But I do want to know what she’s like.”

“You got it, Lloyd! If I get a chance, I’ll ask the king about her. It is kind of a big mystery, huh?”

“Thanks. I’ve got enough on my mind with this career thing. Also, I’m still staying with Marie. If I ever leave, I don’t know what she’ll do...”

Neither of them would ever have dreamed that Marie *was* the princess in question.

They moved on through the thorns, unaware they were being led right to—
As for the other two pairs...

“Oh?”

“My.”

Their paths soon led them back together.

“Kind of takes the wind out of your sails...”

“I would much rather have been reunited with Sir Lloyd.”

“...With Master—not Allan, though.”

Was that Phyllo’s ramen order? It sure made the other girls laugh.

But Merthophan wasn’t joking. The reunion rubbed him the wrong way.

“What’s up, ex-Colonel?”

“Odd... I felt as if the passages themselves shifted to bring us together. Best stay on your toes...*hngg?!’*”

Barely had the words left his mouth—

When a young man stepped from the shadows.

“.....Mmm? That’s...”

“You all seem lively! Such passion!”

He waved merrily, unreadable as ever. Repeating that last word so often, it was giving their ears callouses.

“Shouma?!” Selen yelped. “Lloyd’s brother figure?”

Merthophan stepped out in front of them, looking daunting as he faced Shouma.

“Yes, not a man you forget. Dressed for roughing it, like a courier—and that bandanna. The boy who ran away from Kunlun because he hated farmwork. I’ve learned how great field labor can be, but I still haven’t gotten through to him.”

“That whole farm part is just completely fabricated! Somebody make this Azami colonel talk sense!”

“Ex-Colonel, current agricultural advisor. If you wish to reform, I can get you work on an Azami military field!”

“He’s getting worse!”

Seeing Shouma clutch his forehead, the girls all thought, *The Kunlun problem child is no match for Merthophan*, and gave him sympathetic looks.

Nobody was worse at reading the atmosphere than Merthophan. He’d already stripped down to the loincloth, a sickle in one hand, a hoe in the other

—two Kunlun artifacts, the Adamas Sickle and a hoe with the Tablet of Destinies as its blade.

“Come, Shouma. Your younger brother is mulling over his future. It’s time you do the same. Abandon the path of villainy and take your farm chores seriously.”

“Look, the only place that’s even an option is inside your addled brain!”

Shouma’s voice was rising...but then the whole ambience changed.

A shiver ran down everyone’s spine.

“ ?! That palpable menace? Mistress Selen! Fellow students! He’s after your lives!”

Vritra already had the belt in a defensive position.

Shouma had his hand to his brow and was muttering under his breath.

“Future, my ass. I’ve already chosen my path. Time I cast aside the shadow of those jokers who tried to use me...and end this whole farce.”

Riho took a step back, cowed, turning to her old boss for help.

“What’s up with him, Merthophan? He’s clearly not here to play. Should we wait for Lloyd to catch up?”

Merthophan shook his head.

“Wish that was an option, Riho, but he clearly isn’t planning on letting us go.”

A smile appeared on Shouma’s lips—but it didn’t show in his eyes.

“Yeah, you’re not seeing Lloyd again. This is where you die.”

“.....Look out!”

Shouma’s palm fired a shock wave.

“Vritra!”

“On it! *Hngggggg!* Full Power Guard!”

The belt came slithering off Selen’s hips, forming a circle large enough to protect everyone.

Layers upon layers, a belt net was created.

But Shouma's shock waves kept coming, and their defense barely lasted ten seconds.

"It's not enough...? For shame, Mistress Selen, school chums! You'll receive my apology in writing on the morrow! Hnahhhh!"

"Vritra?! Aiiiee!"

Once the guard was down, everyone went flying, slamming against the grapevine hedges.

"Full Guard sure is passionate, but it'll just prolong the agony!"

"Ow..." Riho put a confident grin on her face, returning the trash talk. "What's ailing you there, bud? You're not usually *this* gung ho."

"Sorry, Riho. I know you're trying to buy time, but I'm not playing along today. It *would* have been passionate, though!"

"Well, goddamn."

He really was like a totally different person. At a loss, someone scantily clad took over.

"I won't stand for it. Come! Traditional☆Farm☆Style!"

The wind whipping the front flap of his loincloth, Merthophan stepped between Riho and Shouma.

"Continuation of the exhibition match, huh? Great passion! I was annoyed we didn't get to finish, too!"

"Yes! Farmwork requires passion! Young man, till the fields!"

"That's not passionate at all! God, your unhinged crap ticks me off!"

Shouma slammed both palms onto the ground.

The earth rose up.

Merthophan's hoe quivered.

"*Hngg!* The hoe is speaking to me! This is very bad news! Everyone, watch your feet!"

""""Got it!""""

Everyone darted away from the risen ground—and a shock wave shot out, bound for the sky.

“.....If we hadn’t moved in time..... I don’t want to imagine it.”

A bead of sweat ran down Phyllo’s chin.

“You’re really trying to kill us, huh, Shouma?” Riho growled.

“Obviously,” he snapped. “But I’m not here to make you suffer. If you just stand still...”

“.....Like hell.”

“Agreed.”

Phyllo launched herself forward.

“.....Hahhhhh! Hi-yah!”

Her chops fired shock waves back.

Shouma hadn’t expected that, and his eyes went wide.

“Wow! Didn’t think you could do that bare-handed! You must have trained like crazy! Love the passion.”

But he also easily blocked them—with his palms.

“.....How?”

“Gosh! You even broke the skin!”

Shouma licked the trickle of blood from his hand. The glint in his eyes was bestial, and Phyllo shuddered.

“.....You’re a monster.”

“Yes. I am, and so is Lloyd. We don’t belong in your world. Hmm, let me try.”

He imitated Phyllo and swung his hand in a chopping motion—firing a shock wave.

“ ! Aughhh!”

Shouma had copied her move after seeing it *once*. The shock of that had made her slow to react. She failed to fully dodge.

“Phyllo! Geez, are we in serious trouble here? Why the hell are you trying to kill us, Shouma?”

“Buying time again?”

“Of course, but also, who wouldn’t wanna know why someone suddenly became murderous? And you seem upset about something.”

The concern in her voice was enough to make him pause. Shouma lowered his arms.

“This is for Lloyd’s own good. I don’t want him to see you die or see your bodies...”

“That’s not a reason. Why would you kill anyone? You’re supposed to be happy-go-lucky!”

“ ”

“So bad even you don’t wanna blab it?”

“Sorry. I’ll make it quick. You won’t suffer.”

“I heard that the first time. But I’m not about to lie down and just take it. *Diamond Dust!*”

She’d been pumping magic into her mithril hand, and she cast the spell as hard as she could.

Ice shards blocked Shouma’s vision, slowing down his movement—

“Weak sauce.”

But he scattered them with a single shock wave.

Riho shot a second and third ice barrage, but he countered them all.

“Gah, I knew everyone from Kunlun was off the charts, but it sure is depressing having it just brushed off like this...still!”

At her signal, Selen and Merthophan dived in.

Shouma was impressed with the teamwork.

“You sure are a smart cookie. Keeping all my attention on you!”

“Vritra, bind him!”

“At your word! And you, Merthophan...”

“Roger that! Secret art...Rice Harvest Slash!”

The belt grabbed him, and the loincloth man unleashed a two-hit combo with the Adamas Sickle and the Tablet of Destinies hoe.

And—Phyllo had recovered quickly, rejoining the front line.

“.....Not out yet!”

“You’re one tough gal.”

“.....If I die...no, not just me. If any one of us dies, Master will be sad. And we can’t ever let that happen!”

As she finished her sentence, she leaped as high as the sun, raining shock waves at Shouma from above.

“A magical sight! Top artistic points! Not many ordinary humans can pull that off! Passion! ...Hahhhh!!!”

With a roar, Shouma used brute force to free himself from the belt, shooting the biggest blast he could into the air above and blowing her away.

“He escaped from Vritra?!”

“.....My attacks did nothing?!”

He reached up and caught Merthophan’s wrists.

“Dual artifact attacks...would probably hurt, yeah. But if a normal human’s wielding them—it’s just a waste.”

“Not quite right. I’ve got *three* artifacts! Extend, loincloth!”

“Yo, what the—why would a loincloth do thaaaaat?!”

Shouma nearly popped some veins blocking Merthophan’s first two hits, but seeing a red loincloth flap snake out from below blew away all that grim desperation and left him scrambling to get away. Like someone had thrown a gross bug or something similarly foul his way.

Once more at range, Merthophan kept his expression stiff, proudly declaring, “Behold our true strength! The Azami army prides itself on coordination! And I,

as a farmer!”

“Just leave that last bit out! Extendable loincloths have *nothing* to do with agriculture!”

“.....Or the Azami army.”

Phyllo was quickly distancing herself.

“That was some special farming service! The elastic cloth informational device known as the Smart Loincloth! S. Loin for short! It records growth progress on the crops and allows you to instantly ascertain the weather and humidity! Truly a loincloth designed to improve crop management efficiency!”

“Nobody wants that! Or your S. Loin! Argh, you’re throwing me off my game!”

Shouma’s head was spinning, but Merthophan was already barking orders to the girls.

“Stand down, cadets. This is not a foe to be trifled with.”

Shouma had his head in his hands. He did *not* want that loincloth wrapped around him...but mainly, his heart just wasn’t in this.

“I’m really going to have to go all out, huh? I honestly didn’t want to make you suffer, but you’re all just...so *persistent*.”

“Feeling down? I know the perfect pick-me-up! Fieldwork! Join me.”

“Now you’re making *me* suffer, ex-Colonel!”

Shouma decided to stop hiding his strength.

The power radiating from him shook the air, gave them goose bumps, and sent the leaves on the vines quavering.

“Uh, crap. That dude wasn’t even at full strength.”

“.....Kunlun villagers.....really *are* that much stronger than Master.”

“Merthophan! Running away until Sir Lloyd gets here is our only option! We won’t last a second fighting that head-on!”

“Then it’s an order,” Merthophan said, resolute. “Selen, Riho, Phyllo, retreat quickly. Maintain evasion until Lloyd or Alka arrives.”

“Cool, but you?”

“Farm spirit dictates I match his intensity in kind.”

“Please just drop that bit, Colonel!” Shouma roared.

“Until moments before, you were still hesitant. I had hoped that would have given me a shot at defeating you, but clearly, that was wishful thinking. Also, it’s ex-Colonel.”

Merthophan had known Shouma’s heart wasn’t in it, that deep down he hadn’t wanted to kill them—and Shouma took that news like a child caught in a lie.

“Tch...that obvious? Yeah, deep down, I don’t want to kill anyone.”

His eyes went wide, glaring at Merthophan.

“Until now! Run, if you can! ’Cause you know you can’t win.”

“No doubt about that,” Merthophan replied, undaunted.

“! Then—”

“It’s simple, really. I’m an instructor at the Azami Military Academy, and these are my students. Former, but that’s hardly relevant.”

You’re really something, Shouma! The star of our school. The teachers’ lives are safe in your hands.

“Get real! Ain’t no teachers like that! Nowhere!”

“Of course there are. I’m one.”

Shouma was shaking his head, but Merthophan wasn’t batting an eye.

“I’ve seen plenty of students like you. Laughing on the outside, raging against the world on the inside. I’ve learned the best way to get through to them is to confront them head-on.”

“Hah?! Are you even hearing yourself?! It’s giving me chills!”

“I drink ginger tea harvested fresh from the fields daily. With that in my system, I never get chills, even in a loincloth! Farmers’ bodies are toasty warm!”

“That shit is what’s giving me chills!”

But his words rolled off Merthophan's toasty back. Even as he spoke those final words, he was swinging his hoe, striking the ground.

This worked just like Shouma's earlier attack, splitting the ground and knocking him off-balance—which annoyed him even more.

"Damn it! Jamming a farm tool in the ground shouldn't even be capable of that!"

"Come, Adamas Sickle! Let us reap!"

Merthophan's back bent down, swinging the sickle at Shouma's feet. He looked *exactly* like a veteran farmer harvesting rice.

"This just isn't right!" Shouma yelped, barely dodging.

Back still bent, he urged the girls to flee.

"Go! While I'm still fighting!" *Swish, swish, swish.*

Merthophan's low blows went beyond comical and became outright terrifying. The girls looked just as appalled as Shouma.

The Adamas Sickle was a genuine, bona fide artifact. Shouma was well aware of the danger and did whatever it took to evade it.

"Shit! I got all serious, and he just makes a mockery of it!"

While dodging, Shouma kicked Merthophan in the guts. There wasn't much force behind it, but Kunlun villagers' powers were beyond normal, and the loincloth man was sent flying upward—a blow more than strong enough to K.O. your average human.

"Gahhhhh!"

"Fly away, freak!"

"N-not done yet!"

But Merthophan's hoe dug into the ground, tethering him.

A stream of blood escaped his mouth, but he swung at Shouma again.

He was still conscious, and his still-bright eyes locked on the boy's.

That unnerved Shouma. Sensing some unknown threat, he flinched.

“?! You’re still going?!”

“Naturally!”

Merthophan’s hoe was already slamming down.

But the difference in their physiques was too great. The blow was easily avoided, leaving Merthophan wide open for the counterpunch.

A mist of blood glistened in the sunlight.

Shouma sighed, certain that had ended it...

“*Hngg...* Rahhhhh!”

But Merthophan did *not* fall. Nose bleeding, face bruised, he swung his hoe and sickle once more.

“Just give it up!”

“Farmers! Need endurance! Strong hips are critical!”

The outburst proved too much for Shouma, and he was forced to step back, off-balance.

Merthophan seized the chance, raising hoe and sickle high.

“Gotcha! My ultimate move! Agriculture☆☆Typhoon!”

His right hand—the trials of breaking new ground. His left—the joy of a bountiful harvest. Farm Warrior Merthophan’s ultimate attack stirred the air, creating a tornado—which bore down on his foe.

However, Shouma just sent shock waves against the winds.

“Sorry! But when I’m going all out—you don’t stand a chance.”

The artifacts gave Merthophan power in Shouma’s league...

...but not the boy’s natural endurance. Between the blows he’d taken and the toll of using the dual artifacts—Merthophan was nearing his limit.

Buffeted by shock waves, he was thrown back and slammed limp onto the ground.

“Gah!”

“If you were in peak condition, you might have stood a shot—but two artifacts are too much for a normal human to master.”

Shouma kicked the sickle and hoe aside and snarled at the prostrate ex-Colonel.

“You’re done for, old man. Do what teachers do and run.”

Merthophan had lost his weapons.

But still he rose. Cracking the whip on his aching body, he stood before Shouma, legs apart, blocking his way.

This display of indomitable spirit caused a flicker of pain to cross Shouma’s face, frustrated by his persistence—and something that ran far deeper.

“Your teachers ran, did they? Painful memories?”

“Hah?!” Shouma roared.

But Merthophan stared him down. “Anyone who abandons a student is unfit to be a teacher! If you can’t even protect children, how dare you call yourself a farmer?!”

“.....! That sounded good until the last word!”

Shouma ground his teeth as if filing them. His fists clenched tightly, shaking in fury. He made to swing at Merthophan again— “Vritra! Block that!”

“On it!”

But Selen’s belt countered his strike.

“What?!”

“Selen Hemein! I told you to run!”

But it was Riho who answered.

“If we leave you to die here, Colonel Choline will be all bent out of shape.”

“Riho Flavin, too? You fool. You had your orders!”

“.....Mmm.”

“*And Phyllo Quinone...*”

He took one glance at the faint hint of a smile on Phyllo's lips and knew she'd never leave a comrade behind.

"Ah...you can't leave the fallow land untilled...although I resent that implication!"

.....Okay, no, he didn't get it at all, and that entire utterance wiped the smile off her face.

".....Lots to argue there, but it's not worth the effort."

Shouma, though, was just bewildered, a sort of even split between rattled and scared.

"Why...why would you come back? Anyone would ditch him here!"

Rather a childish perspective.

"Shouma," Riho sneered. "It sure sounds like you *want* us to."

"Of course I do! I'm threatening to kill you! Why would you come *back*?! You'll die! Your only hope is to save yourselves, run off, hide behind someone stronger! You *have* to!"

"Do we? Come on."

He was like a toddler throwing a tantrum. Totally out of control. Riho looked rather baffled, but Selen paid it no heed, insistently arguing the point.

"Anyone that willing to run wouldn't be around my...be around Sir Lloyd in the first place."

Shouma gnashed his teeth harder, his face a fright—but then, he forced a smile. The smile of a man past caring.

"To hell with it! If I kill one of you, you'll all see the light! Too late for take-backs! No one's coming to save you, so wallow in that misery, you poor, ordinary humans."

He poured out all his emotions, rage, and whatever lay beneath into his shock waves, turning them into a visible aura that swirled around his arms.

That torrent of power would clearly rip the flesh clean off them. Shouma took a step forward.

Merthophan stood his ground, not batting an eye.

“Ordinary? I have no clue why you’re so hung up on that, but I’ll demonstrate the power of an ordinary farmer.”

Not what he’d meant.

“Farm—nope, not going to engage with that.” Riho shook her head. “But Merthophan, do you have a strategy to stand against a Kunlun villager?”

“Just give it all I got!”

“.....So...no, then?” Phyllo queried.

“We may not know what we can do, but doing nothing is worse!” Selen insisted, looking extra smug. “Words of wisdom from my future husband!”

“Ignoring the last part, let’s just throw everything we’ve got at him.”

Selen talked crap, and Riho chastized her for it—that was how this crew rolled.

Shouma bared his teeth. Even *that* was pissing him off now.

“You’re driving me mad! Time for you to die!”

“I’m afraid I can’t let that happen.”

A new voice rang out.

Shouma pulled up short, staring at the ground—and instinctively dodged the thing stretching up from his own shadow.

“My shadow?!”

“That’s—”

The shadow kept rising, taking human shape—with a distinctively spiky hairdo and aristocratic garb.

“Satan!”

His droopy eyes looked around, getting a sense of the situation.

“I didn’t expect this, Merthophan.”

“What brings you here?”

“What else?” Satan chuckled. “You promised to return to Kunlun today! You’re a punctual man, so when you didn’t show up on time, I checked with Marie, and she filled me in. Now then...”

The shadows wreathing around him formed daggers and slashed at Shouma.

Shouma rapidly hurled shock waves into the volley, scattering enough of them to weather the storm.

“A wimpy demon lord? This is nothing!”

“Word of warning—watch your feet.”

But by the time Shouma looked down, the shadow had already snared his ankles, tossing him skyward.

“Shit! That’s not even fair! You’re just a puny demon lord!”

“Young boy, I’m just using my brain,” Satan scoffed. “That’s how you fight when you’re aware of your limitations! You know someone who excels at that, yes?”

Shouma had managed to get to one knee, glaring at Satan.

“You seem rather worn out. Shouma, was it? You’re all upset! And that gives me an advantage. One more!”

Satan’s shadows attacked again.

Shouma backflipped and spun away from the black blades, then launched himself into the air.

“Flying?” Merthophan remarked. “The chief could, and Lloyd learned how...so just typical Kunlun villager abilities, I suppose.”

These things just no longer surprised anyone.

“Ha!” Shouma yelled, scowling down at them. “Pretty passionate attacks, there! But can your shadows reach up here?”

He began rapid-firing shock waves in Satan’s direction.

“These are extra powerful from above!”

Satan was forced to pull the shadows back near him, forming a circular barrier

around the Azami contingent.

Which proved strong enough to withstand the barrage.

Still, it kicked up a huge cloud of dust. Shouma saw the barrier hold and was impressed.

“Nice! Pretty tough stuff there. Still, if you can’t actually *use* them shadows, you won’t get far. I can hold out till after dark! You may have made a grand entrance, but you’re not all that.”

But as if in answer, the dust parted—and the eyes of a massive beast gleamed.

“Are you forgetting something? I’m a *demon lord*.”

“Meaning—?”

Black wings unfurled, and out leaped a lion—Satan’s other form.

“A second form?!” Shouma howled. “Argh, I totally forgot! You’ve all got one!”

“That we do! Blame Lab Chief Cordelia. She’s the one who did this to us.”

“Who the hell is that?!”

Shouma and Satan slammed against each other, midair.

The young man flung more shock waves, but Satan dodged them with a spin, using the momentum to tackle his opponent.

“Tch, nimble much?!”

Satan had wings, while Shouma was flying on his own power. He was forced to use the push of his own shock waves to dodge.

Below, the humans watched in awe.

“I thought watching Lloyd fight had gotten me used to it...”

“But this is too much. If they were as bad as Chief Alka, I’d just go numb and think nothing of it, but here...”

“.....It’s a vast world.”

Leaning on Phyllo’s shoulder, Merthophan provided commentary.

“Shouma’s likely using the power of his shock waves to fly. But since Satan’s second form has wings, he has the advantage. Shouma’s main means of attack is through those same shock waves, but he’s being forced to evade with them—which means this won’t last long. If they came back down, the tables would likely turn—I think he’s just being stubborn right now.”

“Come to think of it, his feelings have been all over the place. Totally not like himself.”

Riho frowned, pondering that.

“We’ll have to ask once this is all over,” Merthophan said.

His prediction proved right—not long after, Shouma succumbed to Satan’s flurry and went crashing into the ground.

He plummeted deep into the earth and struggled to stand. He got to his feet, face twisted in agony...

Thud.

The lion landed before him, its massive jaw twisting into a confident grin.

“Felt like sheer stubbornness kept you in the air that long— Ready to give up, Shouma?”

The young man did his best to match Satan’s aplomb.

“Nah,” he said, forcing a smile. “This is fun! Worth my time! Who’d willingly step off a stage this grand? *Cough! Ka-hack!*”

This was clearly a bluff. He was barely on his feet at all.

“Merthophan wore you down, and then you insisted on fighting my second form in the air, at a disadvantage. Under other circumstances, you might have fought well...but this time, you should really admit defeat.”

“Too bad! We’re already in this! And nothing’s stopping it! This is all for Lloyd’s sake!”

“And the reason for this obstinacy is nonsense. How is this for Lloyd?”

“How is it not?! I won’t let him lose hope! This world is too boring for Kunlun villagers, so I’m going to make it worth his time!”

“.....How so?” Phyllo frowned.

“I lost hope!” Shouma yelled. “There was nothing here for me! You know how it feels, right? Get yourself revved up for a big fight and then discover it’s *nothing!*”

“.....Uh.....sure?”

As a martial artist, she’d certainly fought confident opponents nowhere near her level, so she somewhat understood that part.

“See?! I got all depressed—and I don’t want Lloyd to ever feel like that! I made up my mind to turn this weak sauce world into one worthy of him!”

The words were flowing out of him now.

“He saved me! I’d lost all purpose, and he gave me hope! A reason to live! You see now?”

Like Lloyd, he’d left the village. But he’d known exactly how strong he was. So much stronger than everyone else, it was just depressing. Magic and all, he found nothing to get excited about.

“I can understand that,” Merthophan said—an ordinary human who’d spent time in Kunlun. “Any Kunlun villager could destroy the world, given enough time... But how does that relate to killing—?”

“You don’t understand!” Shouma screamed, not even hearing the question. “The worst thing! Was other humans! All trying to *use* me! Not lifting a finger to help themselves, just sucking up to me! Abandoning all thought in favor of, ‘Just let him do everything!’ And not just one or two people, either! Everyone I met did that! Like parasites! Grubby little insects just trying to suck the nectar from me!”

Shouma stepped right up to Merthophan, face twisted with fury.

“I’m not letting that happen to Lloyd! That boy’s so weak-willed... He takes everything personally! He’s doing his best to make progress! But if he can’t trust those around him, he’ll never recover!”

Some tried to leech off him, some feared him, some just kept piling on the flattery... They’d all been far too obvious, and Shouma had nothing but

contempt for them. His words made it all too clear how miserable he'd been, and that frustration was pouring out of him. Not even giving them a chance to get a word in.

"I hate to have to kill Lloyd's friends! But I know what's coming! You'll betray him, or fear him, and break his heart!"

A sob broke from behind his rage, and his bloodshot eyes scanned each of their faces.

"You're the same as all of them! You say sweet things, but you're just hitching a ride on his strength! You know he can rock the world to its very foundation, so you're pretending to be his friends! That's why you have to die! Before you make him sad!"

"That is the stupidest thing I've ever heard."

Overprotection fueled by painful memories.

A biased mind clouded by doubt and suspicion.

It was Selen who first interrupted his deranged rant.

"Ooh? Big talk from the girl he freed from a curse."

If looks could kill, his glare would have. Anyone else would have backed down, quailed in the face of it...

But Selen just snorted.

"That's just hindsight bias."

"Huh? What—?"

He hadn't expected her to drop this jargon on him.

Not only was she not backing down, her tone took on a gleeful edge—thinking of Lloyd.

"Listen, my face was covered in this cursed belt. I was a hideous, horrifying sight. But Lloyd showed no trace of scorn. He saw me like that and was *nice*. That's all that matters! It was his *kindness* that saved me! It doesn't matter how strong he is! The fact that he freed me from the curse, too? That's just the cherry on top."

Shouma's anger vanished. He was genuinely shaken.

"Th-that's it?! Kunlun powers are just a cherry?!"

Riho chimed in. "I was totally planning on leeching off him, though."

"See? See! That's what normal people do. Try and use us!"

Shouma pounced on her honesty. She was tempted to ask if he *wanted* them to betray Lloyd but settled for giving him a look, then scratching a cheek meekly.

"But see, he's too purehearted? Just trusts *everyone*. Even a bad influence like me. I can't bear to watch it! Ended up not taking advantage at all, just doing the whole BFF thing. You being his big brother and all, I bet you know how *that* feels."

He couldn't argue with that point. He knew just how nice Lloyd was.

Then Phyllo stepped forward.

".....I've recently noticed Master's strength isn't just physical. He has the strength to never give up, no matter how weak he *thinks* he is. Weren't you drawn to that, too?"

" !"

Shouma was really reeling now.

The faces of his old tormentors were running through his mind.

But—these girls weren't like any of them. That pulled the rug out from under him.

"Shouma, if they aren't true friends, who is?" Satan asked. One last push.

True friends.

Something he'd never found outside of Kunlun and had no trace of anywhere in his memories.

"Lloyd has true friends... He made those outside of Kunlun... Found something more than convenience and opportunism..."

True friends, the thing Shouma had most craved and had been unable to

obtain.

Lloyd had what he'd wanted, the joy that had eluded him—and that took the wind out of his sails. Shouma's legs crumpled beneath him.

"Oh...Lloyd...actually did it. He found the thing I always wanted."

"Shouma..."

"It's sooo frustrating. I'm beyond jealous!"



For the first time, he admitted it. He envied his “little brother.”

A tear ran down his cheek. The boy was no longer capable of killing anyone.

A silence settled over the scene.

But before those tears started flowing...

Lloyd and Allan were headed deeper into the maze, unaware the thorns and vines were shifting, leading them forward.

In time, the thorn walls parted, and they found themselves at a luxurious manor.

“Is this it?”

“A building this fancy has to be Tramadol’s place. Guess we picked the winning route.”

Lloyd swallowed hard and stepped forward.

“I hope we can eliminate the cause of these thorns,” he said.

That would stop them from producing more toxic gas and was definitely the best plan.

“We may find a demon lord sealed in something, but let’s take a look,” Allan suggested.

“Yeah, those ‘demon lord’ monsters can be pretty scary! I’ll do what I can!”

That was a great comfort to Allan. As long as Lloyd just thought demon lords were a type of monster, he was probably going to be all right.

However—he was unaware that the sinister foe within was far worse than any demon lord.

They climbed the open staircase. Inside the largest room stood said foe.

“I’ve been waiting for you.” His greeting sounded somewhat impatient.

Sou was standing on the balcony, his back to them, gazing out through the gaps in the thorns, controlling the passages from where he stood.

Squinting against the light that framed him, the two cadets realized who they faced and shivered.

“You’re...the sinister Sou!”

“The bad guy...from the dungeon...”

Sou turned around, a smile on his lips.

“I’m pleased you remember me, Lloyd... Oh?” His eyes found Allan and widened slightly. “I assumed Lloyd was alone. You tagged along? No matter. Well within the margin of error.”

He had been so focused on Merthophan and Selen that he had completely forgotten Allan even existed.

Rather a harsh dismissal, and Allan wasn’t one to let these things pass.

“So I’m a miscalculation, am I? I’ll have you know I worked reasonably hard to get here!”

The outburst was very Allan. Sensing as much, Sou cringed. Enemy or not, haplessness earns sympathy.

“Pardon me,” he said. “But I advise you to stay put until I am no more.”

That last phrase made no sense to either of them.

“I’m confused,” Lloyd said, “But is it safe to assume you’re pulling the strings behind all this?”

“That I am. What better way to make you *want* to fight me?”

Sou’s lips curled in a villainous grin, his voice rife with menace.

“Your friends have already died. Not long after they left your side.”

He looked directly at Lloyd—

But it was Allan who answered first.

“What a liar! They won’t go down *that* easy.”

He let that anger drive him, launching forward, ax raised high. Using the gorgeous coffee table as a stepping-stone, he swung his ax down toward Sou’s head.

Sou did not even attempt to avoid it.

“Hmph. I’m afraid that attack won’t work on me. I am harder than steel

itself.”

“Shut it!”

Clanggg!

The force would have split any mortal’s skull—but the blow bounced right off with the distinct sound of metal on metal.

“Hah?!”

The lack of injury to his opponent and ringing in his own hands definitely rattled Allan.

This gave Sou an opening to grab his arm.

“I did warn you,” he said. “And the palm of my hand can cause immense pain to anything it touches.”

A shiver ran down Allan’s spine—an instant later, unimaginable pain tore through his arm.

“Gahhhhhhhhhhh!”

Like a needle stab, or a jolt of electricity, or his skin being peeled off and salt pressed into the wound—pain unlike anything he’d ever felt before, and the shriek threatened to tear his throat apart.

Sou leaned in, whispering, “And my breath will relax all your muscles, leaving you unable to move. Like so.”

He blew on Allan’s neck.

“Hngg...”

The big man was helpless to stop himself from collapsing onto the carpet below.

“Ah...augh...!”

Between Allan’s utter defeat and the claim that the girls had died, Lloyd was too shaken to think straight or move a muscle.

Sou dragged Allan’s limp body over to the wall.

“There. Lie there and watch us fight to the death,” he ordered, sighing like

he'd just finished a chore. He turned to face Lloyd once more. "Lloyd, how I've yearned for this. It's time we—"

"I-if Allan went down that easily..."

Whether trying to calm Lloyd down or simply enjoying the villainous monologue, Sou began explaining his power.

"Did I not tell you?" he asked, a hint of playfulness in his voice. "I'm a runeman. I merely need to make people *believe* a thing is possible—and it *is*. Like hypnosis—only real. However, the more outrageous the claim, the more difficult that becomes."

He shook his head ruefully.

"It has its uses, certainly. But the downside is that I'm unable to die. All because Alka...never mind. Lloyd, I have slain your friends. You must hate me. Come at me with all your might! Try to kill me! And I will—"

"You can't trick me."

"Mm? How so?"

Sou blinked, unsure what part had prompted this objection.

Lloyd looked him straight in the eye, earnest as all hell.

"Like Allan said, they aren't dead. Not Selen, or Riho, or Phyllo, and not Merthophan. None of them would go down that easy. You can't scare me!"

Seeing Lloyd ready to fight at last, Sou grinned, raising his own fists.

"However you got there, I'm pleased you're ready for combat."

"I'm an Azami soldier! I'm here to defeat the ringleader behind this thorn curse."

The words for which Sou had been waiting. His eyes flashed, and he cracked his neck. "At long last, I can finally disappear... Sorry again, Shouma."

A fleeting glimpse of sorrow passed over his face. He'd had his reasons, but betraying Shouma had been hard for him.

With no knowledge of his motivations, Lloyd simply assumed this was yet another attempt to rattle him and paid it no heed.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, but I can’t let you get away with this. I’m Lloyd Belladonna, the head of the Azami Military Academy first-years! Are you ready?”

“That I am. The ancient hero of yore, Sou. Ready to meet his doom.”

Tramadol’s magnificent manor provided a fitting setting.

Lloyd shot forward so fast that the tables, chairs, and fixtures were swept up in the ensuing back draft.

Moving like the wind, Lloyd closed the gap between them.

He wasn’t holding back. He swung at Sou with all his might.

His target didn’t even attempt to dodge.

Neither did he brace for impact. He was flung backward, over the railing, and into the grounds below.

“I’m not done!”

Lloyd kept going, vaulting over the railing and stomping Sou into the dirt below like a pro wrestler pursuing an opponent out of the ring.

There was a noise like a falling girder, and cracks threaded across the garden.

The force of Lloyd’s blow sent the upper and lower halves of Sou’s body flying in opposite directions.

“Er, yiiiikes!”

This grisly result freaked Lloyd out. Sou had handled Allan’s strike so easily that Lloyd had assumed a *lot* of force was needed.

A body split in half might *sound* R-rated...

...but not a drop of blood was spilled. It was as if he’d torn apart a chunk of clay.

Keeping with the B-movie horror level, Sou’s torso began blithely chatting.

“Hmm, well done. You certainly are from Kunlun. Ah! Forgive me, I should put myself together.”

He made his bisection sound like a stubbed toe. His legs strode over to him as

if on a catwalk.

“Er, huh?” Lloyd stammered, eyes wide.

“Like I said, I’m a runeman. A conceptual being.”

Reattaching his lower half as he might slip on a pair of shoes, he patted off the dirt and was as good as new.

“I purposely let you hit me to gauge your ability. A Kunlun villager you might be; that alone is not enough to harm me. Without power on Alka’s level...”

“Er...um, how are you still...?”

“Mm? Oh, I’m sure you’re well aware that ancient runes can do *anything*. If you make a person out of them, you get me. Not a fate I would wish on anyone.”

“I am *not* aware.”

“Oh...hmm.”

Lloyd used runes for cleaning and other household chores but clearly had not been taught much about their true nature.

“My god, Alka,” Sou muttered. “You never did bother to explain anything. Eug said you were a nightmare to work with, planning everything inside your head and never telling anyone.”

“You keep mentioning Chief Alka,” Lloyd said. “But how do you know her?”

“We’re like parent and child,” Sou ruminated ruefully. “She being the mother, and I, her child.”

“You are?!”

That was startling news on *any* day. From the looks of them, you would assume it was the other way around.

“Something *like* that. Alka created a hero out of runes to save the world. It was an experiment, and for better or worse, it succeeded—and I obtained this false life during the hour of need. I proved instrumental in defeating the demon lords that had escaped the Last Dungeon.”

Sou began monologuing his backstory.

“She should have just treated me like a handy tool, but Alka got herself all *attached*. When she inscribed the heroic saga on ruins and reliefs across the world, she neglected to include news of my demise, leaving me unable to fade away, doomed to wander this world.”

He sounded intoxicated. Perhaps being so close to the end he’d sought, he felt exhilarated.

But unaware of that, Lloyd just dismissed it.

“That makes no sense,” he said. “You’ve been reading too many novels.”

“Heh-heh, no need for sympathy, Ll—er, novels?”

Who expected their life story to be rejected as a bunch of derivative drivel?

“I see where this is coming from. My favorite book has someone with the same name as you in it, and you’ve gone and projected yourself onto him, right? I did the same thing!”

“Er, um...no...I *am* him...”

“Please. You’ve got to stop this! The real Sou was the ultimate soldier! He risked his life fighting evil, saved the world, and in the end, hid himself away, living on in the hearts of all. The book didn’t say he died, so he must still be out there fighting somewhere! When I was a kid, I was sure of it.”

Sou laughed out loud. “Ha-ha-ha! I knew it! You wanted nothing more than for the heroic Sou to be alive! Such a pity.”

“Uh, yeah, I know! It was super-childish. Don’t laugh!”

“Ah-ha-ha! I didn’t mean it that way. But it makes sense now.”

Sou nodded several times, to Lloyd’s chagrin.

“What a mess,” Sou said. “As long as you cling to that desire, I will never be able to disappear. Not as long as anyone with magic reserves like a Kunlun villager wants me here.”

“What does *that* mean?”

Sou didn’t answer. Having convinced himself, his eyes went cold—a clear threat to Lloyd’s life.

“My only choice is to kill you, Lloyd.”

“I don’t understand any of this, especially your connection to the chief, but I do get that you’re really upset about something. I don’t think it’s too late, though! Repent now and surrender.”

“You’re a good boy. But I cannot do that.”

“Then I’ll *make* you.”

Lloyd shot forward.

His footwork was nimble, and dust clouds rose where he trod.

“I’m afraid those attacks have no effect on me. Indeed, those punches will leave your fist racked with unendurable pain.”

Clang! That same metallic sound from Allan’s strike. And the pain *did* come back at Lloyd.

“Unh...*hngg*... Why didn’t that happen the first time?”

“Like I said, I’m a runeman. I merely made you *think* this would happen.”

Like he had with Allan, Sou tried to grab Lloyd.

“And if I grab—”

“! Not happening! *Aero!*”

Sensing danger, Lloyd endured the pain and used his wind spell to propel himself skyward.

“Most impressive. But what can you do from there?”

Given the pain besetting him, it was a wonder Lloyd could move at all.

He resorted to long-range attacks.

“As long as you don’t touch me—I can fire *Aero* at you from here.”

“That may not be true. Your spells will bounce off my palms.”

As he spoke, Sou’s hands began glowing.

When the spell hit them, it rebounded as hard as it had been fired.

“Yiikes!”

Hit by his own gale mid-hover, Lloyd lost control and went spiraling to the ground.

“Surprising, yes? This power can change the very laws of the world itself, given enough time. Whoever developed this technology must have been truly diabolical. I, too, am but a victim of it.”

He began walking toward where Lloyd had crashed.

“It pains me to do this, but we must continue. If I kick you, the agony will affect your entire body.”

Sou hesitated only momentarily. He then kicked Lloyd into the air.

“Auuuuugh!”

Screaming, Lloyd went rolling across the landscape, mud spraying.

A shadow crossed Sou’s face, but his onslaught was unabated.

“Next, my fingers. A mere brush of them will make you feel like you have blades embedded all over your flesh.”

His fingers touched Lloyd’s skin, and shrieks echoed across Tramadol’s garden.

But even as Lloyd screamed—he endured.

“I-I’m still fighting!”

Sou scratched his cheek, giving him a look of pity.

“It saddens me that a day should come when I find your tenacity vexing. But I’m afraid I must end your life.”

His showed Lloyd his fingertips once more, drawing upon the power of runes.

“My nails are incredibly sharp, and the poison coating them is fatal. If they stab you, well, even a Kunlun villager will die instantly.”

Convinced killing Lloyd would bring an end to his own existence, Sou watched as the tips of his fingers lit up with a malevolent purple light.

“ ! Ack!”

“Good-bye, Lloyd. And Alka.”

As his toxic fingers made to pierce Lloyd—

“No you doooooon’t!”

Allan came leaping down from the balcony, chopping Sou’s wrist off just barely in time.

“Oh? You’re back up already?”

Sou showed no sign of concern, merely surprise.

“I heard Lloyd screaming,” Allan snarled. “I can’t just lie there while my friend and mentor’s in agony!”

He took a few more ax swings, yelling over his shoulder.

“Lloyd! Get back on your feet! I’ll buy you some time! You regroup with ex-Colonel Merthophan and the girls!”

“A-Allan!”

Sou had calmly scooped up his hand and reattached it, moving swiftly to eliminate Allan for good.

“A desperate last stand? A man like you cannot hope to stop me. Like I said, your blows will not injure—”

“I don’t give a damn if they do or not! I’m here to slow you down!”

Allan kept up his blind flurry, not hearing a word.

“Oh dear,” Sou said. “That kind of attitude makes that rune rather ineffective. I’ll have to use another.”

He did sound a tad impressed but was mainly annoyed.

To change the active rune required more words.

“But Allan, your efforts are futile. The more you swing, the heavier—”

“Shaddup!”

Allan wasn’t hearing a word of it. He was a ceaseless storm of swings.

“! He’s...not even listening...!”

At last, Sou’s expression soured. He abandoned the idea of using his powers

and reached through a gap in the attack, grabbing the annoyance and tossing him with raw strength.

“Gah! That’s nothing!”

“I *will* have to find a way to make the runes work. This boy is nothing if not sturdy,” Sou muttered.

He then simply turned his back and ran.

A complete change from his earlier attitude.

“Wow!” Lloyd marveled. “You drove him off, Allan!”

“That’s, uh...all thanks to what you’ve taught me!”

“I haven’t taught you anything.”

“No! You taught me how to stand my ground and never give up.”

A safe distance away, Sou turned back toward them.

“I do hate to ruin the parade,” he interjected, “but he didn’t exactly drive anyone off.”

“Lloyd! This guy’s spouting nonsense! It might be our chance to win this thing!”

“That’s incredible, Allan!”

“.....That’s why I loathe people who don’t listen. Just like—”

“Okay! I’m Lloyd’s number one pupil, Allan Toin Lidocaine, and I’m here to kick your butt!”

But Sou shook his head. This distance allowed him to use runes again.

“I’m afraid you’re standing on a pitfall.”

“Huh? Aughhhh!”

Allan had finally listened long enough for a rune to activate, and his body sank into the ground.

Buried up to his neck, only his ugly face and ax hand remained free.

“A-Allan!”

“L-Lloyd! Gah!”

Sou had just kicked Allan in the face, rendering him unconscious and bleeding from the nose.

“In a sense, you’re one of the toughest foes I’ve fought. Much like Alka, people who don’t listen are a genuine handful.”

Sou took a breath, then turned to face Lloyd.

“Shall we continue?” he asked, suddenly grim.

Lloyd responded with silence.

“What’s the matter? Too scared to speak?”

Lloyd shook his head.

“No, I just remembered. I’m not good at anything.”

“Bringing yourself down here? That’s not true at all. You’re highly skilled. Enough to capture my heart. Not just in combat, but your personality, cooking, cleaning, and...”

But mid-sentence, Lloyd’s eyes flashed.

“But Allan just reminded me of what I’m best at! Not cooking, cleaning, or that other stuff! But pushing stubbornly forward, even when I don’t know what I can hope to accomplish.”

For the first time, Lloyd made Sou wince.

“Your whole aura changed... I would have been thrilled a while back. But for this to happen once I’ve resolved to kill you—could be a problem.”

Sou raised both arms, bracing himself.

He had not taken this stance before—it was a boxer’s stance. He moved like a honed martial artist.

The moment his posture suggested it, his build and footwork shifted in kind. How?

“Runemen can do *this*, too. One jab from these fists will leave you writhing in agony, incapable of standing.”

The rune took hold, and Sou's fists began to glow.

With speed every bit as quick as any Kunlun villager's, he landed a right hook straight on Lloyd's face.

Crack! The sound of his nose breaking. But—

Lloyd took the hit. Tearing up a bit but still glaring back at Sou. Showing no signs of writhing in pain.

“How?”

Sou hadn't expected the boy to still be on his feet and found himself grasping for a reason.

Fighting back tears, Lloyd shouted, “Th-that won't work!”

“It won't...? My runes are working, and my physical strength is raised to Kunlun villager levels. The pain must be unimaginable.”

“It hurts! A lot! But...”

“But?”

“I can't fall here!”

Lloyd reared back, aiming for the stomach. Caught off guard, Sou took the punch and grunted in pain.

“Bahh! Huh? Hah?! He actually hurt me?!”

This was every bit as shocking as the ineffectiveness of his own rune. Clutching his stomach, he reeled.

Meanwhile, Lloyd clenched his teeth, enduring the pain. He wiped his tears and rubbed his nose.

“*Hngg*, that hurts... I know! Pain, pain, go away! Oh, that feels better. Shouma's old trick really does wonders!”

“On my rune?! On my strength punch?!”

“Naturally! This is false bravado!”

“I knew my runes were working! But bravado shouldn't be enough!”

His runes had been overpowering them until now, so a little self-deception

shouldn't have made a substantial difference.

"I swore as a kid I would never cry if I used these words."

"Over that silly little phrase? That shouldn't be enough to endure my rune—?!"

But at that point, an idea struck Sou, and he grew still.

"Ancient runes are the power of suggestion. So if you make yourself think the opposite and have the greater strength of will—you can deflect them?"

Sou's ability hinged on convincing his foes that what he said was true.

But what if—like Allan—they didn't listen? Or if sheer mental strength could override them...? Then a false front or a childhood memory might be enough.

"It's theoretically possible... And this boy can do that? Conquer my power?! Madness!"

Unable to accept it, he relied on his fingers once more, using the *poison* rune again.

"Like I explained, these razor-sharp nails are secreting an instant death poison! One prick, and you'll die!"

Using his enhanced physical powers, he was on top of Lloyd in the blink of an eye.

"You're done!"

His finger shot toward Lloyd's stomach...but Lloyd just slapped it away.

"That won't work! Poison? Ha! I drink milk every day!"

"M-milk?! Gah!"

"Exactly! Marie said if you drink milk and sleep well, you'll be healthy! So your stupid poison won't affect me!"

This inarguable logic certainly defeated Sou's ability to respond—and Lloyd's counter scored a clean hit.

Sou stumbled back, clutching his jaw, shaking his head.

"No! No, no, no! That's ridiculous! Milk cures everything? What an absurd

conviction! Oh.”

It dawned on Sou that Lloyd’s situation had always been...abnormal.

Everyone in Kunlun was crazily powerful, so Lloyd had convinced himself he was “weak.” He could see the difference between Azami citizens and himself but had found all manner of rationales to explain them away—“They don’t fly because it’s a big city!” or “Carriages are slower than running, but that’s just how city folk roll!” He mistook monsters for animals or bugs and thought demon lords were a kind of monster...

Quite frankly, nobody on earth was better at generating absurd convictions than Lloyd.

He was Sou’s natural enemy—even more so than Allan’s “not listening” technique.

“Oh...if he can convince himself that monsters are animals, then thinking that milk nullifies poison or that a children’s rhyme deadens pain is no more implausible. My runes won’t work on him?!”

“And Allan showed me that if you don’t give up and keep attacking, you can win! So if I do the same, this battle’s mine!”

Lloyd used this to his advantage. This time, Sou’s body did break into pieces—it was taking *actual* damage.

“The power of your convictions can be applied to your offense, too? You’re harming me like only Alka ever could?! Because of that *nonsense*?! Then...”

Sou leaped back, switching to magic.

“This is *High Aero*. Far more powerful than your spell! Should it strike you, the sheer wind force will rip you to shreds!”

His gestures became extremely mage-like, and magic began swirling around him.

Lloyd didn’t even waver.

“Then I’ll have to use my ultimate move, Tempest Cloak!”

“Er, what *is* that?! First I’ve heard of it!”

“Satan taught me this in the Ascorbic Domain! I’m very proud of it. Satan said if I get this right, nobody can beat me! This is my path to victory!”

Lloyd was rising into the air, wind circling around him. It was lifting Sou up, too.

“Such power... Did you say Satan? Well, he certainly knows how to choose a name.”

“*Aero* is the spell Colonel Choline said was my best! The first magic I ever learned! It won’t let me down! And—”

Everyone Lloyd was grateful to, everyone who’d praised him—all of that was fueling him now.

“Selen said the best thing about me was how I never give up! Riho said hanging in there was very me! Phyllo said she could learn a few things from my tenacity! Allan said my words saved him! Mena taught me about family bonds! Colonel Chrome made it clear I was never alone! Ex-Colonel Merthophan said I should love farmwork! The king complimented me, saying I was a fine young man! Coba said he’d love to hire me full-time, and I was really happy to hear that! Kikyou said I should never give up on my dream! Threonine said he’d be proud to have me as his son! Selen’s father offered words of encouragement! Rol invited me to join the intelligence bureau! Micona encouraged me to live up to the first-year head armband! Glasses girl is warmly watching over me! King Sardin and Ubi told me I could be a good soldier! Lady Anzu said I was making good progress, and Tiger Nexamic and Renge both cheered me on! Chief Alka, Grandpa Pyrid, and everyone back in Kunlun know my limitations but still encouraged me to try! Vritra also said I was improving! Satan told me to have more confidence! And Marie taught me that, if I have friends, I can do anything!”

With each word and each voiced memory, the power swirling about him grew stronger.

“O-ohhhhhh!”

Sou was unable to stand his ground. He was sent hurtling into the air.

Lloyd was right on his heels, rocketing upward, his full might behind the

attack.

“All those people acknowledged me! I wasn’t sure I could be a soldier...but they gave me strength! That’s why!”

“Oof!”

“I won’t!”

“Hngg!”

“Get stuck here!”

“Gahhhhhh!”

Allan was still buried neck deep, but he’d awoken and was gazing up in rapture. “That’s how it’s done, Lloyd!”

Sou’s ragged body sailed through the air, slamming into the ground below.

As it did...the thorns and vines around began to wither.

The crumbling hedge maze revealed the girls not far away. They soon spotted Lloyd and came running.

“I knew you’d take care of things, Sir Lloyd! That’s why you’re my future husband!”

“.....This is a time for rejoicing, so I’ll let that pass.”

Lloyd met them with a smile.

“I knew you’d all be fine! But I was a little worried.”

“It’s going to be a long time before you need to worry about us, Lloyd. Mm?”

Riho flung an arm over his shoulders, and then her eyes met Allan’s.

“Oh! Good, merc! I knew you were still alive!” he bellowed.

“Yo, don’t start weeping on me while you’re still buried...”

While they rejoiced, Merthophan and Satan exchanged grave looks.

“All’s well that ends well, but what do we do with *him*?”

Sou might have been wrung out like an old rag, but lying in a heap—he had a serene smile on his face.

“He isn’t human, just a being made from runes. Keeping him captive would be a tall order.”

Merthophan had fought Sou before and knew how dangerous he was.

“He knew how to use the demon lord’s powers. We don’t want citizens turning out like Tramadol right and left...so we can’t just let him go.”

Satan stepped closer, intending to finish Sou off. The girls and Merthophan made no move to stop him.

Sou closed his eyes, accepting his fate.

“I would have preferred to die by Lloyd’s hand. Anything to increase the chances of my permanent erasure.”

“Sorry, but that kind of dirty deed is best left to the grown-ups.”

“Hmm. He has good comrades. Truly a hero in the making.”

Satan raised a hand, about to deliver the fatal blow—

“Um, hold on.”

Lloyd caught his wrist.

“? Why not, Lloyd? This man tried to kill you.”

“Exactly! He’s put you through a lot.”

“.....Even *you* said he was a bad guy.”

“Alka’s ultimate foe!”

Everyone was arguing, but Lloyd looked unconvinced.

“But...I don’t think killing him is right. How do I explain it? He just doesn’t seem like a bad guy anymore.”

He glanced down at Sou’s resigned face.

“I know he’s done a lot of bad things. At the exhibition match, and the movie, but—”

He trailed off, unable to find the words. Shouma then staggered over.

“Let me chime in here. Mind holding off on killing him?”

“Shouma?!” Lloyd gasped.

“What’s with you, Shouma?” Sou asked, equally astonished. “Why stand against this? Revenge for my deception?”

“Nah, just following my heart.”

Shouma sat down cross-legged opposite the fallen hero, looked him in the eye, and smiled.

“Listen, Sou.”

“What is it, Shouma?”

“I realize it’s a bit late to ask...but do you *really* want to disappear?”

“———Oh.”

There was a long pause.

The fact that he hadn’t answered right away made Shouma’s smile broaden into a grin.

“See, I keep thinking it would be a real shame if you did. I know why you’re hung up on the idea. Your role is done, but you’re forced to linger on, a hollow life without purpose—man, do I ever know how lonely that is. You’ve lost your companions, but I never had any.”

Shouma’s own background gave them a lot in common.

It was Lloyd’s first time hearing any of this.

“Sou, when we first met, you asked me what I saw you as. I answered right away. I said we’re the same. And I was right.”

“I remember. That was when I had lost my purpose in life and was merely wandering aimlessly.”

“So I had a proposition for you. I said I knew a kid I wanted to forge into a hero. That shared purpose is what made our lives worth living. Trying to turn Lloyd into a hero was fun, right?”

Sou smiled, remembering how they’d stood arm in arm, delightedly capturing Lloyd’s heroism on camera, like guardians at a sports festival.

“Yes, it was...”

Meanwhile, Lloyd looked aghast. Which rather undermined the dramatic scene.

“If you’re feeling overwhelmed, just tell yourself it’s not worth thinking about,” Satan said, patting him on the shoulder.

Sou and Shouma didn’t notice.

“I get you! An empty heart, filled with loss...with a new fire lit, propelling us onward! You’re the friend I was looking for when I left home, the friend I finally found! Don’t be so ready to fade out for good.”

Shouma’s passionate speech made Sou think of the past.

Born of an unprecedented rune magic designed to create the hero who could bring peace to the world, he was fated to live by that principle, vanishing once his purpose was fulfilled. Yet he did *not* vanish, wandering without purpose, like a ghost...

Until he met Shouma. To ensure his proper end, they chose to forge Lloyd into a new hero. Cheering him on, concocting new schemes—it *had* been fun. He had learned how to enjoy himself.

And he was reminded that having like-minded fellows was a source of constant happiness.

“Shouma.”

“What?”

“It’s fun to have things to do.”

“I know, right?”

“And you’ve reminded me...how good friends are.”

His eyes drifted away, into times of yore.

“Damn it, Sou! Why are you still up?”

A boy had been sitting on a grassy knoll, enjoying the breeze on his face, gazing up at the stars above—until that voice shattered the mood.

He turned quietly toward it, and the muscle-bound man to whom it belonged.

The boy looked like he'd stepped out of a painting. He had even features that seemed somehow fragile, white hair, and pale skin. The moonlight glittered in his eyes—beauty every bit as bewitching as the skies above.

Sou bobbed his head. "Pyrid," he said.

The well-built man had short-cropped black hair and wore a ragged sleeveless shirt, a black cape, and baggy trousers. An outfit designed to make sure you knew how ripped he was.

Reaching Sou's side, he slapped the boy on the back, laughing heartily.

"Getting butterflies? I totally understand. Fate of the world's hanging on tomorrow. Even a 'fierce god' like yours truly might be tempted to wish upon a star."

Sou nodded, his eyes back on the sky.

"If I die, will I become one of them?"

Pyrid stroked his chin with a burly finger. "Good question. Ain't never died myself! But can't say the idea's all that appealing. Where would the stars get their ale?"

"So uncouth."

A man in black was standing right behind Pyrid, his face hidden beneath a black cloth—your classic ninja garb. But he *was* a ninja.

"Augh! Don't sneak up on me, Amakusa."

"Keep your voice down, Pyrid."

"It's a normal volume!" the burly man argued. "Don't be so dang fussy."

"Can't agree with you there, Pyrid. Amakusa is not the only one concerned."

Behind the ninja loomed a giant snake—who spoke like a strict boss. Rather a dignified, haughty attitude for a monster. He had the type of voice that belonged to someone whose shirts were always perfectly ironed *and* starched.

"Vritra, here to nag—ugh, not just you. Alka and Eug."

“You woke us up, Pyrid.”

“Can confirm! Who can sleep with you yelling?”

Behind the snake stood a twenty-year-old woman in white robes, along with a smaller girl sporting a helmet.

“Majority rules, Pyrid. Submit your apology in writing tomorrow.”

“Ganging up on me, huh? This might be Sou’s last night, you know! Who minds a little fuss?”

“It’ll be a hard day, and we need our sleep.”

“Alka, not what I want to hear.”

“But she’s right,” Eug said, standing beside her. “Plus, Pyrid, you might not be coming back, either. If we mess this up—”

Pyrid just guffawed. “Damn, I forgot about my own illness! Mwa-ha-ha!”

But then a dark look appeared on his face.

“But it is in there?” he asked, looking at Alka. “This ‘ancient rune’ that can cure me?”

Holding her long black hair against the breeze, Alka showed no emotion.

“Yes. That’s the Cordelia Research Institute. The source of these demon lords. There was another team working on medical runes. They should be in there.”

Pyrid had no idea what half those words meant but quickly decided he didn’t care.

“You and your gibberish. But I get we just gotta fight our way through a ton of demon lords and seal the place up! Save the world while we’re at it! Can’t believe I had it in me. There’s no telling where life’ll take you, eh, Amakusa?”

“No. I left the hidden village seeking peace, never imagining I would be embroiled in a battle like this.”

“Any plans for after the fight?” Sou asked.

“Hmm...an occupation where my ninja skills would be useful to those who live in the light. Perhaps a woodcutter?”

His voice took on a wistful tone, but Pyrid slapped him on the shoulders.

“I get this here cure, I’m gonna teach students all over the world! Found the Pyrid-style! Well, Amakusa? Wanna be my first pupil?”

“Don’t make me laugh.”

“That’s what you most lack!”

“Enough comedy jokes!” Eug said. “Pyrid, you’ve been scrawling your awful handwriting in that scroll of yours. Is that your collection of secret arts? It said to drop boulders over a waterfall and swim up it, shattering all of them, then finish by splitting the waterfall.”

“Oh! Basic bodybuilding technique. Want to give it a shot?”

“...You meant it? Oh my god, you’re so dumb.”

Pulling Eug behind her, Alka returned to the topic of the *restoration* rune.

“No telling if we can find the rune. If we don’t, you’ll have to sleep in Eug’s cryogenic device.”

“That’s the ice thing? You *sure* that won’t just kill me?”

Eug poked her head out from under Alka’s sleeve.

“Don’t worry! The way I use magic is absolutely brilliant! But thawing you out without breaking down your cells can be rough, so prepare for some side effects—like a lack of memories.”

“Memories? To heck with ’em! My body remembers the techniques! Bwa-ha-ha!”

“Always the optimist.” Amakusa sighed. “But...that means we’ll be parting with you soon. When you wake, it might be my children’s or grandchildren’s generation. Look after them for me. Consider it the first and last wish of Kan’ichi Amakusa.”

“You got it. I’ll look after whoever it is! Be it Kanji or Kanzo!”

When they were done, Sou turned to the girls.

“What about you, Eug? Alka?”

“Me? I got heaps of plans. First, going to hit up the dwarves, start making stuff to improve this world. Alka?”

“Even sealed, this place will regularly pop out demon lords. I’ll monitor them and continue researching runes. Start a village.”

“Oh.”

Eug looked rather lonely, and Sou felt the same.

Seeing that, Alka stroked his back.

“Sou, you may be fated to disappear once your purpose is fulfilled. But the deeds you’ve done as a hero will forge futures for those to come, people whose faces we have yet to know.”

“For generations to come?”

“Exactly. I believe influencing those who follow us is the greatest honor a person can have. Politicians, scientists, novelists...people in all manner of fields are working to leave a *legacy* behind.”

She spoke warmly, like a mother comforting her son. Similarly, Eug jumped in (like a sister).

“You’re not his mom, Alka! Oh, weren’t you working on some weird statue? Saying you were capturing memories? You don’t have an artistic bone in your body! But you’re developing a maternal one?”

This seemed to catch Vritra’s interest. Tongue flicking, he moved his head closer.

“So that sculpture was meant to be us? Er, and that thing was me? That gelatinous-looking, wriggly horror? I oughta take you to small claims court.”

“She finished sculpting me, Sou, and herself, then ran out of artistry... God, this world needs photos. That’s it! Once we save the world, I’m making sure everyone has cameras!”

“Enough!” Alka’s iron mask crumpled, and everyone laughed. Sou couldn’t help but join them.

“Well, it is late. Get some rest, or you’ll miss the meeting tomorrow.”

“Vri, it’s a final battle, not a meeting.”

“Oops, my apologies, Eug. Why did I say...? Hmm, I have this memory of scolding a man with messy hair... Am I growing tired? Well, I will head to bed first.”



The giant snake twisted around and slithered away. Pyrid and Amakusa spread blankets out on the grass.

When they were asleep, Eug whispered in Alka's ear.

"Director Ishikura's starting to remember Seta. Watch him, will ya?"

"Perhaps I should tell him the truth when this is over. That we're the scientists who changed the world and the demon lords are our former colleagues."

Eug made an X with her hands.

"I'm against it, Alka! If he remembers more, he might go nuts searching for his daughter."

"If I explain...?"

"And everyone who *has* remembered reverts back to the prime of their human life. He won't be a snake anymore."

"That works against us, but..."

"Remember, Vritra's a giant guardian beast. You're Alka, the Priestess of Salvation. Sou's the hero, and with the cooperation of the King of the Dwarves, we can control the power of the Last Dungeon. You already wrote as much in ruins the world over. That's how you got a global rune magic going and made the world think we have a chance against these demon lords. If Ishikura goes bonkers *or* gets stuck in human form, we'll be forced to find a new guardian beast."

"You're sounding a little desperate, Eug."

"I'm feeling *guilty*. I'm partly to blame for the world ending up like this. I need that experiment's failure to have meaning. The way to do that is to make this world better than the last one. If we push rune research, maybe we can find a way to get his missing daughter back and return all the scientists to the way they were. But until then, leave Ishikura's memories alone."

"Okay." Alka nodded.

"Mmm?" Eug squinted. "Wait, Alka, are you shrinking?"

"Good question. You said when memories return, our bodies revert to the

time of our most precious memories. That means...I might wind up looking nine years old.”

“Oh...so *this* Alka isn’t where your best memories lie...?”

Eug looked genuinely crestfallen and headed back to her own bed.

Sou had been absently listening, and Alka nudged him. “You’d better sleep,” she said.

“Just a while longer. It’s my last night sky.”

“.....Well, suit yourself.”

She sighed, and Eug yelled back at them, “He’s just like his mommy, Alka! Grew up watching you!”

A pleased smile flickered over Alka’s lips, and she mussed Sou’s hair before heading toward her own bed.

“I don’t know for sure if I’ll vanish,” Sou murmured, gazing up at the stars. “But I’ll miss my ties to all of you.”

As if in answer, a shooting star streaked across the sky. Taking that as a metaphor for his own future, he settled down on the grass, lost in the view above.

Remembering his past, Sou spoke like he had back then, whispering wistfully to nobody in particular.

“Friends bring you pleasure. Purpose gives you strength. Certainly, I had lost both; I was little better than a ghost.”

“Didn’t think I’d hear you talk like that!” a cute little voice said.

Recognizing it, he turned his eyes in that direction.

“Done with your rebellious phase, Sou?”

There stood Alka. Finished with her work at the Azami castle, she’d hurried over, a bead of sweat on her brow.

He winced at that phrase. “I tried to plunge the world into chaos, Alka. Putting that in those terms is very *you*.”

“That’s what it is! You are what you think, after all.”

She mimed tunnel vision, and he laughed, relaxing.

They fell silent, speaking with their eyes, their feelings. This went on a long while, and then Sou spoke.

“One last thing, before I pass out, Alka.”

“Yeah?”

“The old lady voice is very odd.”

“Shut it! I’ve been talking like this longer than I haven’t. Too late to go back... Wait, Sou!”

But before she’d even finished her answer, his eyes closed, and he fell asleep.

“...Such a child.”

This last line Alka delivered in her old manner of speech. For a moment, she seemed like someone else entirely.

A few days after the thorn curse case concluded...

With the ringleader, Sou, defeated and Alka’s antidote distributed, Azami’s damage was minimized.

But it was the most aggressive move the Jiou Empire had made yet, and all branches of the military were mired in legislation and counterstrategy development...meaning nobody had time for interns.

Since it had never been anything but an excuse to find out what Lloyd wanted, the instructors seized the chance to abandon the whole thing.

And since Lloyd Belladonna had played the biggest part this time around, he was recognized and rewarded accordingly and was due to be honored by the king himself.

He’d saved the Military Festival and helped bring the thorn curse issue to a close...so no objections were raised, and the ceremony was held with the unanimous consent of the military’s upper echelon.

That ceremony was today. The audience chamber in the Azami castle was filled with soldiers in full dress and a nervous-looking crew of cadets.

Lloyd was at the front, looking more nervous than anyone. He was standing upright in his uniform, reminiscent of a child waiting for a scolding.

Before him stood the king, the PR director, the chief of security, and the top diplomat—all grinning ear to ear. As if in the presence of their favorite idol.

A fanfare rang out, pitched somewhere between merry and grave in a way that made it sound like the opening notes of a musical. Lloyd jumped. Having been through this himself, Allan was nodding sagely.

“I did the same thing... Lloyd, being rewarded is a good thing.”

He was busy dabbing his tears, but the girls were less than impressed.

“You were nervous because you knew you didn’t deserve it.”

“Sir Lloyd actually does.”

“.....Shh.....it’s starting. Ignore Allan.”

Allan’s tears took on a new meaning. He had one foot in an “all-out bawl.”

That farce aside, let’s turn back to Lloyd. As the fanfare blared, someone beckoned to him, and he nervously stepped forward.

“We are gathered here today to honor Lloyd Belladonna, whose efforts resolved the case of the thorn curse!”

The king’s voice boomed through the chamber and was answered with cheers. The three bigwigs, the teachers, the soldiers, and the cadets, all applauded him.

“Griind...”

Well, one second-year was gnashing her teeth, but pay Micono no mind. Deep down, she knows he deserves it. Probably.

The king took a step forward and pinned a medal to Lloyd’s chest. It was small but beautiful, bearing the Azami coat of arms.

“Lloyd Belladonna, in honor of your deeds, I confer this medal upon you.”

“Th-thank you, Your Majesty.”

Lloyd bowed his head to the king, the soldiers around him, and the cadets, in

turn. This put a smile on everyone's lips.

"All he accomplished, and he hasn't changed a bit."

"That's what's so good about him! A far cry from some people I could name. Right, Rol?"

Choline's spite made a frown flicker across Rol's brow, but she soon recovered her composure.

"Point taken, but being too humble is a problem in itself. An education at our hands would do him wonders."

"Yep, you'll teach him everything he shouldn't do," Mena smirked, her eyes just barely opening.

A vein throbbed on Rol's head, but she remained calm.

As applause thundered, the king continued showering praise.

"A job well done, Lloyd. I could not be more grateful."

"No, I was just... I couldn't have done it alone."

The king chuckled and then lowered his voice, asking, "Made up your mind about your career path yet?"

"Er, um...yes."

Lloyd seemed surprised by the question, but when he started to stammer an answer, the diplomat leaned in.

"You've proved yourself and have been decorated by the king himself. You'll have your pick of positions now. Even the diplomatic branch—where we offer top-tier pay and status."

A subtle pitch. But the security chief was not about to be outdone.

"Given the nature of your deeds, I think you'd be perfect for the security division. If you join us, you'll soon have a key role in the department."

The diplomat shot him a look, but before he could respond, the PR head jumped in.

"Magnificent, Lloyd! You've got the skills and the looks! Sure you don't want

to be the new face of Azami? Allan emitting manliness, and you handling the cute factor! You do pull off cross-dressing! Perfect, right? What do you—oof!”

That guy never could read the room. The other two saw the look of horror on Lloyd’s face and quickly shoved him out of the way.

That skit done with, the king urged Lloyd for an answer once more. As this was a potential partner for his daughter, he was very curious and hoped the boy would make a good choice.

The king was certainly suggesting he could use his royal power to make whatever his aspiration happen.

Lloyd thought a moment longer, then said, “I know only too well how much I have to learn. This honor is far too great. I’m only here because my friends, teachers, and the adults in my life have taught me so much.”

Although she’d been gnashing her teeth just moments earlier, Micona grunted approvingly.

Extra earnest, Lloyd explained his current thoughts.

“I’m able to stand here because all these people helped me and mentored me. I feel like the best way to put that experience to good use...would be if I became a teacher myself.”

He wanted to encourage students who lacked confidence and help them improve. To take the kindness and experience others had given him and pass that on to the next generation. Given his nature, perhaps this was always the answer.

The three bigwigs all looked crestfallen, shoulders slumped, clutching their heads.

But the king’s smile broadened.

He could tell Lloyd was not after fortune or fame. He had chosen a path he genuinely wanted, born from a desire to share what he’d learned and to aid others.

Such a good boy. A boy like that could be trusted with his daughter, he thought.

“Ho-ho-ho! Mm, glad to hear it. I’m sure you’ll be a good teacher. I guarantee it.”

The girls were all grinning.

“So like him.”

“.....My master.....is a model to us all.....”

“Never disappoints.”

“A teacher?! *Gasp!* Special classes, after hours, clothes awry!”

One of them was off in a world of her own, but pay her no attention.

The king stroked his beard, wrapping things up.

“Well, then, Lloyd, may your progress be worthy of this award.”

“Yes, sir!”

Then, in a quiet voice that no one else could hear, the king added, “So about my daughter...?”

“Yes? Um...”

“Only you can decide how you feel. But do bear it in mind.”

With that, the ceremony ended, and Lloyd returned to his friends. Riho and Allan slapped him on the back, smiling.

“Congrats, Lloyd!”

“Nice! Mm? Something bugging you?”

Riho saw doubt in his face, and Selen pounced on it.

“Of course there is! All manner of strange women will be after him now! I’m sure he’s thinking, ‘Selen’s the only girl for me!’”

“.....If that were true, he’d have been worried a long time ago. He’s already pretty mobbed.”

The girls were off in full squabble, but Lloyd’s mind was elsewhere.

“The princess? I just don’t know...”

He’d never even met her, but somehow she was in love with him. That just

didn't make sense.

"I don't know anything about her. I'd better ask Marie about this. She knows more about this stuff than me."

"So what's the problem, Lloyd? Selen again? She's a nightmare."

"I am not! Riho! This is not my fault! Right, Sir Lloyd?!"

With no way of knowing the princess was the very person he was planning to ask, Lloyd pushed the problem out of his mind and joined the celebration.

While Lloyd was getting himself decorated...

Surrounded by steep mountains and fields teeming with monsters: Kunlun village, in Pyrid's house. Shouma was looking after Sou, who had yet to awaken.

"....."

Not breathing, as if asleep—Sou lay like a dead man, and Shouma was fretting about it.

"Sou..."

Alka patted his shoulder. "Worried?"

"Well, he is a friend...and he doesn't look injured. So why won't he wake up?"

"Runemen are pretty strange creations," she said, taking a close look at Sou's face. "He takes damage in accordance with the strength of his foe's willpower. It may not look it, but this runs deep...and he's *still* fighting."

"He is? How so?"

"He won't wake up until the process is complete. His newfound desire is to free himself from the shackles of the hero of yore, to be reborn as a new man—most likely, your friend."

"As fellow Lloyd-supporters...that's some passion!"

Shouma grinned and gave Sou's hand a squeeze.

"Hang in there, Sou! Once you're back up, we can rave about Lloyd together! Without all that crap about disappearing!"

The more he babbled on about Lloyd, the more Alka looked askance.

“This is all fueled by Lloyd, hmm? Shouma, you scare me.”

His smile froze, and he turned back toward her. Eyes not smiling.

“You are the *last* person who should be saying that, Chief. Or did you forget how you said you wanted a massage, made him do all kinds of sketchy shit one step away from a lawsuit, and the whole village had to gang up to stop you?”

“Urp...if you hadn’t ratted me out, I might have managed to cross that line! Ever since, the villagers have been more watchful! I don’t even get to *try* and go after him anymore!”

“Don’t blame me! That’s to be expected! Why would you even want that kind of massage?! Lloyd’s so innocent, he totally believed you!”

“And that’s how you convinced him the city was dangerous, right?! Same thing!”

Alka was *clearly* losing this fight.

They both doted on Lloyd equally—and that put them at odds with each other.

At this point, Pyrid and the woodcutter, Kanzo, came in.

“What’s this? You finally come home, and you’re fighting already?”

“Grandpa, don’t blame him. You know it’s the chief’s fault somehow.”

It was now three against one.

“Aughh, nobody has my back! I made this town!”

“Yeah, yeah, outta the way, Chief. It’s getting colder out! Need to lay in the firewood so we can all keep warm.”

Kanzo started dropping treant wood by the stone stove.

Pyrid hauled his Killer Piranha to the kitchen.

“Shouma, no use if you collapse, too, while tending to him. I’ll fry this up for you, so wolf it down. Got some veggies from the fields to go with it.”

“Thanks, Grandpa Pyrid, Kanzo.”

Kanzo just waved him off.

“How’s our guest doing?” Pyrid inquired, glancing at the bed. “He’s not breathing. Sure he’s not dead?”

“He’s fine,” Alka said, nodding emphatically. “You should know perfectly well he won’t die that easily.”

“I do? Come again?”

Seeing him genuinely baffled, Alka sighed.

“You were his best friend, and you don’t even remember. We should have thawed you out once that *healing* rune was perfected! Made sure there were no side effects!”

As she muttered away, Pyrid took a good long look at Sou’s face.

“Hmm...I reckon he does look a bit familiar. I also get the feeling he’s gonna be okay. Like you say!”

Pyrid patted Sou on the shoulder like it was nothing.

For an instant, a smile seemed to flicker over the runeman’s face.

“...Looks like he remembers.”

Try as he might to reject them, his former companions stayed with Sou. Perhaps he’d been trying to unleash the demon lords in the hopes that his old friends would come back, Pyrid included, to stop them once more. Typical rebellious phase, Alka thought, with her most motherly smile.

“Deep inside, you harbored the desire to remain with your friends and to stick around. That’s why you never disappeared and why I could never bring myself to eliminate you. My fault for not really trying until the fate of the world was on the line.”

She sighed like any mother would.

“Why’d you have to take after me with the whole ‘not listening’ thing? Is it my fault for never listening?”

Kanzo let out a strange noise.

“You’re not making a lick of sense, but no use getting mopey about it, Chief. Imitation is a sign of admiration, after all.”

“It is?”

“Yep,” Pyrid confirmed. “For better or worse, when people think something’s cool, they start to copy it. We had one right with us! Stuck to his guns and ran off to the city.”

“I want to move to the city and become a soldier!”

Pyrid’s words jogged Alka’s memories. How her beloved boy had pushed past all objections, fighting his own weakness, throwing himself into that harsh environment...

Once his mind was made up, he’d plunged ahead, looking neither right nor left. A strength and a weakness but always a positive influence...

Sou, too, had been chasing that, in his own twisted way. He’d been drawn to Lloyd precisely because that was who he’d wanted to be. That made sense to her.

“Thanks, Pyrid. For a muscle-brain, you sure hit the nail on the head sometimes.”

“Mm? Uh...you’re welcome.”

The realization to which he’d led her felt like salvation.

It looked like those words had helped Shouma, too.

““The one Lloyd admires...””

They cringed, realizing they’d spoken as one.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Shouma. Lloyd grew up following me around!”

“No, no, no, no. Absolutely not. I was the first one to leave town, despite everyone’s objections! I’m the one he admires. That thing where he never backs down or changes his mind? Also me. You’re nothing but a bad influence!”

Pyrid and Kanzo were unimpressed.

“There they go again. These two and their Lloyd love-offs.”

“I say we leave ’em to it.”

They left, shaking their heads.

Once they were gone, Alka got serious.

“Shouma, time we got to the point.”

She settled down, prepared for a long fight. Sensing that, Shouma nodded, turning toward her.

“What are the Jiou Empire and Dr. Eug planning? That’s what you want to know, right?”

“Mm, all the messes you were making. The idea of opening up the prison Kunlun’s hiding and unleashing everything inside—it’s real bad. Even if you meant to help Lloyd.”

She leaned in, looking him in the eye.

“But if we can thwart Eug’s schemes, there’s no problem. So I need to know all of it.”

“.....”

“Your plan was to keep Lloyd from despondency by making a world strong enough for him. To let him work for his admiration, right? You’re passing your dream on to him.”

Shouma stayed silent.

“But Lloyd isn’t you. He’s strong and has been improving without losing hope. Both his heart and body are growing...especially the latter, heh-heh-heh.”

This last bit somewhat ruined the vibe.

“Chief, can you not stay serious for one minute?” Shouma asked.

“Heh-heh-heh...don’t be silly. I can last *one*.”

Probably not two. Like those games that say “collect over a hundred friends” when the total available is one hundred and one.

Wiping away the drool with her robe, she resumed her interrogation.

“So you don’t need to back Eug anymore. Go on, spill the beans! All her plans...plunging the world into chaos, forcing the advance of science—how far has she gotten?! And—?”

Her voice dropped, as if this was the *real* question.

“How deeply involved is the King of Profen—Eve? I need to know *all* about that.”

Alka clearly didn’t want to believe it—but another part of her seemed convinced she should have known all along.

Like the true mastermind was right in front of her the whole time, deceiving her own friends and pulling strings with no one the wiser.

Afterword

When the going gets tough, I get going.

I spared no effort in neglecting myself, polishing my indolent body to perfection...but all good things must come to pass, and yours truly, Toshio Satou, has finally embarked upon...a diet.

I took the confidence gained from turning years of prize submissions into an actual novel writing career, and I applied it to the goal of losing weight.

Over the subsequent four months, I lost just under ten kilograms. Now as I write this, I'm down eleven. A success! Sorry, no punch lines here.

Since I started keeping records, I've kept below 1,500 calories a day, limited sugar intake, lifted weights, done squats, chin-ups, and the rest four times a week. One cheat day every two or three weeks where I go over 3,000 calories.

I can see my body changing. If you consciously let them rest, muscles are all too ready to grow. It's a revelation.

Then, about two months into this, something happened that made my revelatory eyes face reality.

"I'm not getting any work done..."

The secret's out of the bag. Without enough sugar, my brain does *not* work.

That hour of training? When I'm not feeling up to it, I waste an hour before I start, and when I'm done, I'm tired—so it takes *three* hours. And my grip strength doesn't recover, so I make typos galore...

The whole idea was that I'd become a novelist so I can diet, too! But dieting made me stop writing. Defeating the whole purpose! The dumbest thing ever.

I'd learned that muscle mass and sentence output were inversely proportional, but it was too late to turn back! If I abandoned the diet, I'd definitely balloon back to fatter than ever before! So I'm still at it. Sticking to

the appropriate carb intake until I get that six-pack.

Authors and sugar restrictions are a poor combination, and me dieting is dumb—I really should have known that all along. Part of me knew, deep down, and just avoided facing that fact. Regrets.

And with that, let's move on to some words of gratitude.

To my editor, Maizou, sorry my selfish carb reduction delayed the manuscript and left it in such shabby condition.

To my illustrator, Watanuki, the Volume 10 cover shows both glimpses of their interpersonal relationships and how they've grown—it really says, "We've hit double digits" and is a lovely piece of artwork. Thank you.

To Fusemachi, on the manga adaptation, the fourth novel's serious scenes and panels showing crowds of adventurers both turned out perfectly. I'm sure there will be more trials ahead of you, but hang in there.

To Souchu, on the spin-off manga, my scripts pay no attention to layout, and I'm so grateful you make it all work.

To everyone in editorial, management, rights, and GA Bunko, I'm grateful for all your help.

To everyone involved in making the anime, thank you for persevering through the rough schedule.

It's hard to meet colleagues these days, so I appreciate everyone who organized the on-line drinking party. That helped so much.

Thanks to everyone, *Last Dungeon Boonies* has reached the big tenth volume milestone. I can't express my gratitude enough.

.....So on the day it's released, I can reward myself with some tonkotsu ramen, right? I mean, it is a *milestone*.

I look forward to seeing you all again in Volume 11. If I can report that the rebound still hasn't hit me, that would be even better.

—TOSHIO SATOU, always willing to jinx himself



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